Writing the Short Story

Edith Mirrielees

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WRITING THE SHORT STORY

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BY

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The probable impossible is better than the impossible probable

To

L. B. M.

In sending out this text, the writer sends with it her gratitude to those patient classes and colleagues, whether at Stanford or at Bread Loaf, by whose aid the material used has been accumulated and tried, and especially to Professor S. S. Seward, Jr., of Stanford University, whose emendations are embodied in every chapter; to Professor Brassil Fitzgerald, of the University of Montana, who has contributed generously from his own experience in the teaching of narrative writing; to Miss Rosemary Drachman, who has read and corrected the manuscript; and to Mr. John Farrar, Director of the Bread Loaf Conferences on Writing, at whose suggestion the book was undertaken.

FOREWORD

The author of this text has taught classes in short story writing at Stanford University, and at the Bread Loaf School of English in Vermont. She had also published some twenty or thirty stories, bad, good, and indifferent. Out of these two sets of experiences certain articles of belief have emerged.

The first of these beliefs is that no work done in college is, if rightly done, more permanently valuable to the student than is imaginative writing.

The second is that college students, young men and women in their late 'teens and early twenties, are capable of sustained and effective work in fiction.

The third is that the worker in any field is better off for knowing what other workers in that field have accomplished, what principles they have discovered, what devices they have found useful.

It is in accordance with these three beliefs that this book has been written. Each chapter in it discusses one phase of writing, follows the discussion with illustration from stories already written, and ends with application to student work. The appended exercises, whether oral or written, are intended to insure the student's comprehension of the material contained within the chapter and to furnish profitable starting points for class discussion. How many of the exercises should be used and how often they should be used depend upon how advanced the class is in writing and what facility it shows in analysis. The exercises may well be made the means whereby a student learns to criticise a story intelligently, whether his own

or another's. The feeble generalizations which frequently pass for criticism—"I think it's pretty good." "I don't think it's so very good," "I don't think he made it sound very real"—and the wasting of time on trivial differences of opinion regarding facts—"Lilacs aren't in blossom in July," "I've seen 'em in blossom then"—may be eliminated by constantly referring discussion back to the main point of whichever chapter is immediately under study. Half an hour's critical consideration of the point of view from which a story is written helps both story and critics. Half an hour of wandering expression of approval or disapproval helps nobody.

Free use is made throughout the book of illustrative material. A volume of short stories, *Significant Contemporary Stories*, has been compiled to accompany the text, and with each chapter there are suggested for reading the two or three among these stories which furnish especially apt illustration of the points the chapter covers. So far as the experience of the writer of this text goes, study of what other people are doing in short story writing is all but invariably useful to beginners. There is no danger of such a study's cramping originality except in cases where it is unwisely limited. When the instructor saves all of his exclamation points for Wilbur Daniel Steele or when he saves them all for Sherwood Anderson, then his students, unless they have had the habit of wide reading on their own account, are likely to be warped. But a fair look over the field, one story balanced against another, means that any prospective writer worth his salt walks into a dozen rapturous imitations, conscious or unconscious, along the way to finding his own path, and walks out again from each somewhat the better writer for having admired. Enthusiasms in matters of style

quite as much as in matters of substance are essential to writing at all.

In the choosing of stories for use as examples, whether in *Significant Contemporary Stories* or in quotation in the text, one condition aside from the aptness of the example has been steadily regarded. All of the stories answer, in the compiler's opinion, to the vague requirement of being "well written"—not sloppily written, not crass, not drenched in sentimentality. Classes in imaginative writing not only provide valuable intellectual training; they are, or may be, a potent means for refining taste and cultivating the habit of literary judgment. If they are to be potent, however, they must deal with material of intrinsic worth. If students emerge from such courses no better able than when they went in to distinguish in contemporary writing between excellence and trash, then either they have entered in a state unusually fortunate or their time has been wasted.

Because of the practice of many books dealing with short story writing, it is perhaps appropriate to mention here what otherwise could be taken for granted—that this text deals with the writing, not with the marketing, of stories. This limitation has not come about because of the writer's believing marketing to be unimportant. Marketing is undoubtedly important, but it is a quite separate business. The preliminary to entering with any lasting success on this quite separate business is the ability to write a story decently well, and aiding students to write decently well is what college classes are concerned with. To devote class time to teaching students how to sell that which they are not yet able to produce is to defraud the student and to compromise the college.

E. M.

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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

Within the last half century the short story has largely escaped from the net of its earlier definitions. The nineteenth-century divisions—story, sketch, tale—are out of fashion. When a contemporary reader or writer speaks of short stories, he uses the term to include at once John Russell's surprise-ending stories, Virginia Woolf's all but actionless analyses of emotion, Katherine Mansfield's studies of egotism, Lord Dunsany's wandering and dream-like allegories. All of these are short stories. Of a form so inclusive what is left to say by way of definition?

Characteristics of the short story.—Contrasted with earlier exactitude ("The short story is a series of related incidents leading to a culminating incident."—"The short story is the presentation of an isolated problem in human conduct, shown from inception to conclusion") there is not much left, but there still is something. Even with the present wide application of the term, there remain some characteristics common to all short stories and some combinations of these characteristics which mark off the short story from other forms. It is the purpose of this introduction to consider such characteristics, looking towards a definition admittedly loose, and useful rather as a beginning point for discussion than as a concluding point.

On the way to definition, the most obvious characteristic of the short story is, of course, that it is short. It is in prose. It is imaginative—a piece of invention, not a cutting from fact, no matter how much fact may be held in solution in it. Also—a characteristic more difficult to

state than to recognize—it is self-contained and self-sufficient, all parts of it adhering to a central core and by their adhesion making plain the shape and nature of that core. An isolated chapter from a novel is not, except in the rarest instances, a short story, because, though short and imaginative and in prose, it lacks this central core. Nothing has been finally shaped, nothing has been completely revealed, within it.

If the characteristics thus noted were to be forced into a sentence of definition, that definition would perhaps be this:

A short story is a brief prose narrative, primarily imaginative, which, by means of the adhesion of every part to one central purpose, renders a coherent and interpretative account of some phase of action, character, or mood.

As has been noted, however, this definition is more useful for beginning discussion than for ending it. Each of the explanatory words in it is itself in need of explanation. "Coherent." "Brief." "Interpretative." How brief is "brief"? To whom coherent? How far interpretative? To a reader unaccustomed to Henry James' manner of writing, *In the Cage* may well be a maze of incoherence and incoherence only. O. Henry's *Ransom of Red Chief*—does it interpret anything, real or romantic? Is *Heart of Darkness*, which runs to more than thirty thousand words, still a short story?

All that can be said in answer is that a short story must be coherent to that group of readers with whose habits of thought the writer is in accord, not necessarily, nor even conceivably, to every reader; that it must be "interpretative" in somewhat the same limited fashion; and that it

must be brief in comparison with the generous measure of the novel. *The Turn of the Screw*, for example, is accepted as a short story, because, though nearly forty thousand words in length, it is close knit about a central core. *Nocturne*, equally close knit about its central core but almost twice as long, passes out of the short story group. "Brief" is an elastic word, but there is still a limit to its elasticity.

It is this limit to elasticity which establishes the only unescapable prohibition upon the use of material for short story purposes—the prohibition which demands that material, before it is used, be separated into slender strands. Some degree of such separation is necessary for any writing. Selection and isolation can never be avoided, but selection is more severely exercised, isolation more complete in the short story than in any other prose form. A short story, like a novel, may cover years of time, *or* it may deal in complicated action, *or* it may present numbers of characters. Unlike the novel, it may not cover years of time *and* detail complicated action *and* present a host of characters. "Brief" being capable of only so much stretching, an increased degree of choice becomes essential. Where, as in Katherine Mansfield's *At the Bay*, interest is shared among a considerable number of persons, the happenings shown are of the slightest; character is given not only the center of the stage, but all the stage. Where, as in *The Great Stone Face*, the story stretches across a lifetime, all the episodes of that lifetime concern a single person. No one inclusion possible to the novel writer is impossible to the writer of short stories, but an inclusion must be strictly paid for by accompanying omissions. The short story writer's medium is the spot light, not the search light.

Classification of short stories.—One of the results of this spot-light illumination, each illumination defining one bit of territory with intensity and ignoring all outside that bit, is that, superficially at least, short stories seem less related, the one to the other, than do the individual examples of other prose forms. They offer, consequently, an especially tempting field for classification—a field which has already been cultivated in many different fashions and in which there is always space for new divisions. For students of writing, however, classification, however ingenious and logical, is not generally useful. A story may be a local-color story, a one-character story, a story of long or of short time scheme, but these are distinctions which, from the writer's standpoint, are largely accidental, matters decided anew for each story. Of many possible classifications, perhaps only two need here take our attention. One of these is that which divides stories according to the nature (not merely the duration) of the time periods shown in them; the other, that which divides them according to author's purpose towards his readers. These two, because they relate to method and to the author's attitude towards life, are worth pausing over.

Stories separated according to the nature of their time periods fall into two groups. The one group contains those stories which deal with crucial moments in the lives of the characters shown; the other, those which deal with typical moments. Stories dealing with crucial moments concern themselves, of course, with unusual happenings. Stories dealing with typical moments are concerned with happenings chiefly repetitive. Any one familiar with story classification recognizes here the division between the "plot" story and the *tranche de vie*, the cross-section story. The terms are momentarily avoided only

for the sake of pointing out that, while useful as titles for the groups concerned, they are by no means accurate definitions of those groups. Unusual action is, in fact, quite as truly a "slice of life" as is repetitive action. Every life contains both, the quality of the slice depending on whence that slice is taken. And "plot," in any but the narrowest sense of the word, exists in every story.

But under whatever title, the division is one worth thought. In the "plot" story the persons concerned are in active struggle with events. It may be successful struggle or it may be unsuccessful; in either case, it is the struggle which makes the story. Tacitly, therefore, the writer of the story admits, and causes his readers to admit, that that struggle is important, containing at least the possibility of the character's triumph, material or spiritual, over whatever fate oppresses him. In the *tranche de vie*, on the other hand, this possibility of triumph has been eliminated before the story opens. What we see is the hero swept along by events. When we see his struggle at all, we see it as a shadow gesture, a thing incapable of producing significant change. Fate, not man, is in obvious control.

The second classification, made according to the author's primary purpose towards his audience, cuts in three ways. It may be his purpose to present to his readers a picture of life as it seems to him actually to be. It may be to provide them with an escape from life into a world of his own conscious arranging. It may be to point out to them the advisability or inadvisability of a given course of action.

Either of these two classifications relates not only to the story but also to its writer—to his view of what life is, to his view of the objects of writing. That a writer pro-

duces or does not produce local-color stories, that he concerns himself in a story with half a lifetime or with half an hour may be no more than chance. It is a matter of temperament, not chance, whether he desires most to show his readers what he has seen, either actually or in imagination, or to instruct them in the way they should go. It is a matter of temperament, too, whether he sees life, and desires to record it, in the terms of striking individual happening or in the terms of repetitive happening.

Along with definition of the short story and mention of the limit shortness places upon its use of material may well go some consideration of what is the object of stories, so far as any one writer is concerned, what kind of world and what kind of relation between world and individual he means to express.

Terms used in discussing short stories.—Thus far, the whole story has been under consideration. Of the internal structure of a story most of what can profitably be said at all requires to be said at length and accompanied by example. There are, however, certain terms used in the discussion of internal structure which embody ideas useful for the student of writing to have clearly in mind when his work begins. The "point of view" in a story is that point, whether in the mind of one of his characters or in space overlooking all his characters, where the writer decides to locate himself; the "time scheme" is the sequence of scenes and of time spaces between the scenes which he decides to use—these definitions are all but self-evident, but they are worth noting for the sake of avoiding even momentary vagueness.

The central core.—One other term, used already earlier in this chapter, requires somewhat more elaboration. This is the term "central core" of a story. What is this central

core? Is it invariably existent in short stories and never existent elsewhere in fiction?

The last question has been partly answered by the earlier reference to *Nocturne*, but the answer can bear a further emphasis. Among novels, there does now and then, though rarely, appear one with the internal structure usual to the short story but of a length which makes "short" a misnomer. Compact adhesion of every part of a story around one central core, however, nearly always results in brevity. It is possible, but it is exceedingly unusual, for a novel to simulate short story form. With a short story, on the other hand, the presence of a central core is inevitable. There is no story without it. A series of incidents lacking such a core remains only a series of incidents, raw material for either novel or story.

What, then, is this never-absent core? In many stories it is an abstract idea, a philosophic principle, to give body to which the incidents of the story are chosen. In many, too, it is the moral, the "Thou shalt," or "Thou shalt not." *The Man without a Country*, changing from place to place over half a dozen oceans and stretching across the better part of a lifetime, is none the less shaped firmly in every part about one moral, every incident helping to bring the moral to the reader's view. *Omar*, with nothing at all to say which has a bearing upon conduct, uses its incidents, one after another, first to express and then to echo its decision, "Life is protracted disappointment."

Central core is most readily distinguished, or at least most readily discussed, in stories like the two just quoted. It is, however, by no means always either philosophic principle or moral. It may be a trait of character, as in *Mr. Reginald Peacock's Day*. It may be a cycle of action, as in *The Pit and the Pendulum*. Whatever it is,

events shape around it in the story as clay is shaped over features in the making of a mask. A story becomes a story only when its material is sufficiently shaped to suggest, even if not wholly to reveal, what central core it is surrounding. A story is effective in proportion as every part does its share towards that revelation. From the writer's standpoint, recognition of what the central core of his story is, is identical with understanding of what it is he is really trying to say. When, by means of incident following incident, he has succeeded in saying that one thing and in saying it briefly, he has written a short story.

PART I

THE FIRST DRAFT

CHAPTER I

PREPARING THE FIRST DRAFT

Suggested Reading: *The Connoisseur* ✓
The Persistent Little Fool ✓

In making a poem you have no right to think of anything but the subject matter. After making it, no right to boast of anything but the form.

—Robert Frost.

The best way to write the first draft of a story is to want to write it, to get continually more excited at the thought of writing it, and finally to sit down and do the writing. What lies in front of that "finally" differs as far as from Dorothy Canfield's " . . . the characters fully alive in my mind and visualized, even to the smoothly braided hair of Ev'leen Ann, the patchwork quilt of the old woman . . ." to the assertion attributed to Mary Wilkins that frequently, when she wrote the opening of a story, she knew its first incident and its last and nothing between.

Help in writing the first draft.—But at whichever extreme the writer stands, one thing remains true—the early struggle with a story idea is largely a lonely struggle and only now and then capable of being aided by discussion. Detailed criticism in the earliest stages is as likely to harm as to help. As a matter of practice, an idea may quite possibly be so unstable that no outside person could find foothold in it for discussion at all and yet may excite

in some one mind a feeling vivid enough to keep it working there till form grows around it. The title Kipling attached to his narrative of an upheaval in the subconscious mind, "The Finest Story in the World," is the title that belongs always to a story before its incidents are chosen or its first words set down. Anything which interferes with that sense on the writer's part of having this time found the finest thing and captured the uncapturable, injures, to just the extent that it does interfere, the excellence of his conception.

Help, then, in writing is one of two things. Either it is general stimulation and general, very general, discussion of the application of principles to a particular idea, or else it is help in revision. The greater part of the outside help that can be given a story is given it in revision.

But that the originating of a story is a lonely process does not mean that it is necessarily an unguided one. Even though no such things exist as set rules for writing or specifics for enabling the writer to invent incidents for his story, there are, none the less, certain habits of writing and, especially, of thinking, which, ninety-nine times out of a hundred, are helps to a story's growth, and there are some few conditions necessary to the existence of every story. It is these habits and these conditions which are discussed, one by one, in the chapters of this book and which are to be noted briefly in this opening chapter with a view to aiding the reader in his initial attempt at story planning.

Repetition.—First, then, what are some of the conditions a writer must consider in the writing of his story? One, and the most important, is that anything he wants his reader to be impressed by, he must tell him over and over. One telling is not enough. Under different guises he must keep presenting him with the same idea. For

example, how often, in *The Connoisseur*, are we told that Mr. Baruch is without pity in his pursuit of treasures? How often, in *The Persistent Little Fool*, are we told that Bina does not know when to surrender a desire? Whatever we want our readers to be really interested in, we must tell them with the same iteration. How to enforce and how to vary the telling is discussed in Chapter II of this text, but for the moment let us remember only that an important trait belonging to one of our characters must be shown, in one fashion, or another, many times.

Time.—A second thing to remember is that every story has to be confined within a certain time of happening. If the time of happening is short—that is, if our opening point is chosen as late as possible in our story—we are in the less danger of writing disconnected and stringy narrative. There is more to time treatment than merely the finding of beginning and ending points, but that "more" will have to wait for later discussion. A careful reading of the two stories already quoted, *The Connoisseur* and *The Persistent Little Fool*, will show some of the devices most easily used for keeping the time of a story clear and for getting past unimportant time intervals.

Point of view.—When we have decided what is to be emphasized by repetition and at what point telling is to begin, a third matter for decision is what relation the teller is to have to the story. Is the teller to be one of the characters and tell only what, as that character, he sees and hears? Is he to stand outside and let the persons of the story explain themselves? Or is he to show the inside as well as the outside of those persons and deal with what they think and feel? Observe where, in *The Connoisseur*, the author has decided to place himself and how steadily he keeps to his decision. Observe, in *The*

Persistent Little Fool, the reason which allows the reader to be taken inside one or another mind. Choice of point of view, like repetition and choice of beginning point, comes back finally to a question of what it is the writer most wants to tell.

To say anything at all within the length of a paragraph or two about characterization or about the underlying idea in a story would be time wasted. Both of those topics must wait for fuller treatment. Instead, let us turn for a moment from the story to its maker. What about the writer? What habits of writing, whether for the individual story or in general, will help him towards his goal?

Planning the first draft.—As has been said, the conception of a story and the finding of incidents to fit that conception are necessarily individual matters. For a writer working as one of a class, a summary of his prospective story, written after the incidents have been given a tentative order and submitted for criticism, is usually worth more, and much more, than the time it takes. One of the values of such a summary is that it compels the writer himself to think his story through before he dashes into it. Another is that the summary is likely to reveal any fundamental flaw in the story's plan. A fundamental flaw may result from the story's embodying contradictory ideas, or it may come from purposeless incongruity of character, or from an opening too far from the main event, or from choice of a point of view which destroys suspense. In any of these cases, so much extra effort is required to obviate quite unnecessary difficulties that it is usually better for the writer to reconsider his plan while it is still in the rough than to continue spending labor on something unsatisfactory in itself and helpful to later writing only in case its shortcoming is recognized.

A story, however, may be successfully planned and still be unreadable when it is written. After the summary has been submitted to whatever criticism it is to meet and the resultant changes in plan have been pondered by the writer, comes the next step—the actual first writing.

The importance of haste.—For most people, and especially for most beginners, this writing should be done fast. It is likely to be best done at one sitting, phrases and scenes ready to hand being set down, gaps left for later filling.

The reasons for this hasty procedure are two, one applying to the particular story, one to the writer's general method.

The particular reason is that haste makes for mental heat, and mental heat is necessary for fusing the story into one mood. Where time intervals and changes in the writer's feeling intervene between parts of a story, the keeping of the same "tune" throughout becomes increasingly difficult. Once the story is on paper from end to end, with no matter how many gaps and dashes for filling, it is fairly safe and can be worked on at leisure.

The general reason for haste in first writing is that the act of writing, the mere keeping of the hands moving, is a help towards concentration. No habit is more destructive than the habit of loitering over the page, the writer's languid attention at the mercy of every outside sight and sound. And, conversely, concentration grows with practice. Every ten minutes of blind and deaf immersion in writing makes further immersion more readily possible.

With its commitment to paper, the story is actually in existence and ready for those revisions which shall both improve the piece of fiction in hand and make for the betterment of its successors.

PART II

REVISING THE STORY

CHAPTER II

THE REQUIRED REPETITIONS

Suggested Reading: *The Country of the Blind*
The Man Who Could Work Miracles

Once upon a time there lived a king who was very great and also very greedy. Every year he took tithes of all the corn his subjects raised and stored it away in a great granary to sell when prices were high. . . . But, though the doors were sealed and the windows were sealed and nobody could get in, there was one thing the builder had forgotten. Up in the eaves, next to the roof, was a tiny hole where the bricks had not quite fitted together, and one day a swarm of locusts flew past the granary and one of the locusts found the tiny hole and flew in. When he came out, he carried off a grain of corn, and after him another locust came and carried off another grain of corn, and another locust came and carried off another grain of corn, and another locust came. . . .

THERE is no reason why the story should not go on indefinitely. There is plenty of corn; there are plenty of locusts. The only place a shortage can occur is in the patience of the reader.

But though the reader who is only a reader may presently find his patience wearing thin, the reader who is also a writer discovers in the locust story a very definite usefulness and interest. Itself a parody upon a certain kind of story telling, it gets its effect, like all parodies, from its exaggeration of a truth—in this instance, from its exaggeration of one of the two essential truths governing fic-

tion. What it parodies is the writer's habit of repetition. It uses repetition to the point where repetition becomes a hindrance to the story, but repetition in itself is not a hindrance. Instead, it is a necessity. A story can become a story only by means of it. No matter what he is writing, the fiction writer must tap repeatedly on the same spot—"and another locust came and carried off another grain of corn, and another locust came and carried off another grain of corn." He must do also one other accompanying thing which the teller of the locust story neglects. Tapping on the same spot, he must yet vary the sound of every tap.

The difficulty of repetition.—These two seemingly contradictory requirements, to say again and again the same thing and to say it in ways never twice the same, lie at the base of all story making and constitute its difficulty. Getting an idea for a story is simple—the world is full of ideas. Finding some incident which embodies that idea—this, too, is relatively simple. More often than not, the incident arrives in mind simultaneously with the idea it is meant to body forth. But finding a series of incidents, each expressing that one idea and no other and each differing from all the rest is obviously a feat, and a feat requiring notable skill.

The necessity for repetition.—There are two reasons for repetition, both springing from the reader's relation to the story. In the first place, bulk is the most effective means a writer has at his disposal for showing the scale of importances in his presentation. He gives more room to his main idea than to his minor ones; therefore his main idea stands out above the others in the reader's thoughts. In the second place, it takes time—and time in writing can never mean anything except space—for any idea,

main or subsidiary, to impress itself firmly on a reader's attention. When he begins his reading, the reader's mind may be anywhere. It has to be moved gradually in the direction in which the writer wants it to go, has to surrender itself slowly to credulity, a little more and a little more with each paragraph. And yet in the course of reading a story and, especially in the earlier course, many readers are sensitively awake to monotony and instantly repelled by it. Each tap, therefore, by which a writer drives home his idea must have a sound different enough to be accepted for the sake of its own individual interest, while at the same instant it affects the reader's emotions in the fashion of its predecessor. Where only one or two taps are registered, the emotion they engender is usually insignificant. Where variation is omitted, the effect is that of the endless-chain story quoted at the beginning of this chapter.

Variation in repetition.—Repetition, then, is the means by which a writer forces on his reader the importance of what he is saying. Variation is the screen he sets up in front of his purpose. Both exist in every story, but the amount of variation necessary differs greatly according to the kind of audience for which the story is intended. If we look back, whether towards folk tales or towards the stories of our own childhoods, we are likely to find repetition emphasized at the expense of variation. In these tales there is the smallest attempt, if any, at preventing the reader from recognizing repetition—frequently there is an insistence on such recognition. In some folk tales not only is repetition of happening so marked that there is no possibility of its being overlooked, but this repetition of happening is further emphasized by repetition or near-repetition of phrase, as in *The Three Bears*, in *Jack and*

the Beanstalk, and in *How Mr. Rabbit Was too Sharp for Mr. Fox*. And though originally, of course, this repetition of phrase had to do with the story's being a told thing, not a read one, seemingly the child reader or the childlike reader still enjoys seeing in advance what is coming, and being warned that it is identical with something shown before. It is not only that the pleasure of recognition once outweighed monotony in the reader's mind; it does still in many cases.

On the other hand, where variety is emphasized, this increase in variety does not mean decrease in the actual number of repetitions with which an incident or theme is presented. *The Country of the Blind* represents its main idea as often as does *The Three Bears*. It uses only a more complex series of disguises. Continuous taps on the same spot are always needed, whether the writer is addressing a group barely literate or one well read. But the barely literate group will not only be more patient with lack of variety in the sound of the taps, it will even relish the story the more for detecting likeness between episode and episode. Some variety, however, there must always be.

Variation adapted to purpose.—If, then, in one proportion or another, repetition is always necessary, and variation is always necessary, what are some of the means for achieving this double end? Let us look first at three stories where it has been achieved—in the first instance primarily in behalf of plot, in the second primarily in behalf of theme, in the third of character.

Repetition in behalf of plot.—The first example, put first because it is one of the easiest of stories to analyze, is Poe's tale, *The Pit and the Pendulum*. (Excerpts from *The Pit and the Pendulum* are given in the Appendix for those who have forgotten it since their high-school days.)

The story is one which has been effective with readers for a century and remains effective still. Reduced to skeleton, it presents one of the clearest examples of the solution of that problem of inner likeness and outer variety which is the writer's central difficulty in the choosing of incidents. What makes the example especially clear is that here the problem is not complicated by secondary interests. The reader is asked to believe in and sympathize with one thing only—the presence of excessive physical danger. He has no interest in the hero as a man, no acquaintance with his personality or his past. Any other hero would do as well. What is wanted is not sympathy with an individual but conviction on the reader's part of the reality of the peril. He is to be convinced of that peril, to care about it, to shudder at it. To accomplish this end, the author must keep the peril steadily to the fore for an appreciable time and yet must not allow the keeping to become monotonous so that attention flags before the crisis.

To effect his purpose, Poe presents first a series of different dangers. The earliest one is the danger of death by falling into an unseen opening yawning in the dungeon floor; the second, the descent of death in the form of a slowly moving blade beneath which the victim is fastened; the third, death through the hot walls' pressing the victim forward into the now seen, though not described, pit.

Each episode offers death, which is the ultimate of all dangers. Each episode offers it in a new form. But, standing alone, alteration of kind of danger does not constitute variety, or at least not sufficient variety. Alteration of the form in which death approaches is only the beginning of Poe's alterations. Beyond this, each prospective death appeals to a new nightmare terror in the

reader's experience—the terror of falling, known to every dreamer; that other dream terror of being in the track of danger and unable to flee it; the terror of being burned.

And each danger in turn is avoided by means not only in themselves different but springing from a different source. The first time, the hero trips on the torn hem of his robe and falls forward over the edge of the pit, thus discovering it before he is precipitated into it—escape by sheer accident. The second time, he rubs the fats and oils from his dishes of food over the leather thongs which bind him and so persuades the rats swarming in his dungeon to gnaw him free—escape through his own ingenuity. The third time, "The fiery walls rushed back. An outstretched arm caught my own as I fell, fainting, into the abyss. . . . The Inquisition was in the hands of its enemies"—escape through the intervention of outside aid.

Each of the sets of shifts, taken by itself, is unimportant, but because of them all, the attention given by the reader to the danger is not kept long centered on one form of fear, is disturbed neither by over-emphasis on the hero's ingenuity, as it might be if all of his escapes came from his own skill, nor by over-consciousness of luck working in his favor, and yet is never allowed to wander from contemplation of his danger. The reader believes in the danger because it is vividly presented again and again. He does not weary of it because each presentation differs not only in one particular but in a whole series of them from each other presentation.

Repetition in behalf of theme.—As was noted in beginning the discussion of it, *The Pit and the Pendulum* is one of the easiest examples of repetition to analyze, since the story's repetitions look only to one end. A more complicated example is that found in Wells' *The Country of*

the Blind. Here Nunez, the hero, cast suddenly, the only seeing man, into the isolated valley inhabited by a blind race, builds high hopes upon the effects of his seeing. Honor and dignity will be his, power will accrue to him, "In the Country of the Blind the one-eyed man is king." The narrative is to show the inception and the destruction of this proverb-based hope. From the first meeting with the valley's inhabitants,

> He drew his hand away. "I can see," he said.
> "See?" said Correa.
> "Yes, see," said Nunez, turning towards him, and stumbled . . .

to the verdict of the blind surgeons,

> "Those queer things that are called the eyes are diseased in such a way as to affect his brain. . . . In order to cure him completely, all that we need do is a simple and easy surgical operation—namely, remove the irritant bodies."
> "And then he will be sane?"
> "Then he will be perfectly sane and a quite admirable citizen."
> "Thank Heaven for science!" said old Yacob and went forth at once to tell Nunez of his happy hopes,

a series of adventures is required in which sight shall be continually a disadvantage and yet in which it shall never twice be a disadvantage in the same fashion, since, after one misfortune, Nunez can guard himself against a second identical one.

So far, the story parallels *The Pit and the Pendulum*, but while repeated taps upon his consciousness are forcing home to the reader a realization of Nunez's civic handicap, there accompanies them a second set, also subject to continual variation, which emphasizes Nunez's own personal delight and benefit drawn from seeing.

Nunez had an eye for all beautiful things, and it seemed to him that the glow upon the snowfields and glaciers that rose about the valley on every side was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. His eyes went from that inaccessible glory to the village and irrigated fields, fast sinking into twilight, and suddenly a wave of emotion took him, and he thanked God from the bottom of his heart that the power of sight had been given him.

Both sets of repetitions are necessary, and a particular balance between them is necessary if the conclusion, born of the conflict between the two conditions, is to be justified in the reader's mind.

Repetition in behalf of character.—In neither *The Pit and the Pendulum* nor *The Country of the Blind* is the character of the hero of special importance. In Fanny Kemble Johnson's story, *The Persistent Little Fool*, on the other hand, it is character which determines the action, and character therefore which gets the benefit of the main repetitions.

The title identifies this main set. The seventeen-year-old girl who is the heroine must be foolishly persistent in many ways and of course all those ways must differ. This alone would not be extremely difficult, but there are two limitations to be observed. It is necessary to the story that the heroine be likable. All of her ways of persisting, therefore, must be likable ways, trying to other persons in the story but warming the reader's heart toward the persistent one. And these likable persistencies must stay within the range of possibility for the comfortable, ordinary household wherein the seventeen-year-old finds herself.

No new character problem is involved in finding these repeated evidences of persistence. Once the lovable, annoying heroine is conceived, she stays as she has begun.

But the inventing of a series of parallel incidents is an act harder for most writers, with the limits necessarily placed around it, than was the original conception. In *The Persistent Little Fool*, the variations by which the series is distinguished are worth some study. The most obvious variation is, of course, the movement of Bina's adventures from member to member of the household till every one has yielded to, and later resented, her teasing insistence. This most obvious alteration, however, is bulwarked by three other sets, inconspicuous but not the less effective.

It should be mentioned, perhaps, though it needs no more than mention, that repetitions are not confined to the main idea of a story. Any careful reader soon discovers for himself that they are not. Every important trait or mannerism, every significance of landscape needs to be impressed on the mind by repeated presentation. In *The Man Who Could Work Miracles*, Mr. Maydig is shown to be inconclusive and mentally pompous. These are not difficult traits to grasp, and yet the reader is not trusted to gather them from one statement. Mr. Maydig is given chance after chance for their display.

The individual problem.—So much, then, for use of repetition and variation in stories already published. Now for the writer's own story. What is the thing he most wants the reader to feel? By what repetition has he sought to make it felt? And what variety has he introduced to cover these repetitions?

Each story presents, of course, its individual answer to these questions, but, though this is true, it is no less true that, along with its individual answer, it presents also a series of answers common to all stories. There are certain pitfalls in the path of every story, and these it is possible to discover from work other than the writer's

own. Take, for example, the following opening paragraphs from a student story, so far, an unsuccessful one.

On Loretta Hudson's left hand the top of the little finger was missing. Just the very top—enough to leave a shriveled flatness where there should have been a round. Loretta had cut it off herself when she was seven years old. No, it hadn't been an accident. It hadn't been even a matter of disobedience. Loretta's mother had never thought to say to her, "Don't cut off your fingers."

She had been doing an errand at the butcher shop and, standing in front of the chopping block, Wally Reese, a year older, had dared her. "You daren't hit your hand with that knife. You daren't! You daren't hit your littlest finger . . ." Well, Wally had been more frightened than she when the thing was done. But it had taken her a long time, much longer than it had taken the finger to heal, to realize that the top would not grow on again. She had a way of holding the finger inside her other hand and moving the rough end up and down on her palm. Her mother said it ought to remind her, but it never seemed to. Even her mother granted that.

It did not remind her in the least that spring she was nineteen and stood leaning against the door of Whitley Raymond's car, the restless little shriveled finger-end busy as usual, listening to Whitley's account of his drive up Flat Hill Road. Listening to Whitley was always a dangerous luxury. For one thing, you never knew how much of what he said was true. For another, really nice girls—oh, well, she was only going to listen a minute.

"Greatest sight I ever saw! Must have been a cloudburst in the hills last night. Stream's up over the banks. And the road! I'd try to take you up to see the falls, only you'd be afraid of it. You'd never dare . . ."

From this point, the story is the story of her wild ride with Whitley, of her being marooned with him by the rising stream, of the dangers and consequences of that marooning, and of her resultant reformation in the matter of taking dares.

The first weakness of the story is immediately evident. The heroine's inability to refrain from taking a dare is the cause of her adventure. It is a perfectly good cause, quite as good as the heroine's persistency in *The Persistent Little Fool*, but it is so little emphasized by repetition that the story is left unconvincing and ill-motivated. That at seven years old a girl should cut off her finger-end and at nineteen endanger her life and reputation by reckless driving—the two, taken together, do not establish recklessness. It requires more incidents to do that, more taps. The two given, though good in themselves, are too far apart in time, and even if they were closer together, two are not enough. In the course of nineteen years, either Loretta's particular kind of recklessness has been many times exhibited or else it is not actually her predominant characteristic at all. If the character is firmly grasped, if the writer himself knows what it is which causes his heroine's action—whether desire for applause, or inability to weigh consequences, or fear of disclosing a hidden cowardice—then there should be sufficient example of the thing to give the reader a chance to know, too. Till the reader has that chance, there is no story.

Every critic of the writing of beginners has met with plenty of stories where, as here, the writer has envisaged an opening situation and a closing one without enough corroborative material between the two to justify the story's existence. If, however, as is the case with this story, beginning and end are really cut from the same piece and are themselves capable of arousing the reader's interest, then improvement is a matter of amount of labor, of hunting out, scrutinizing, and passing or rejecting incidents.

It is this labor, this struggle of the mind, after the first

rush of emotion over the newly found story idea has passed, which most amateur writers refuse. They feel, in good faith, that they have no power over their minds to compel them to work. And in many instances they are right—their minds are not under control. It is, however, exactly this same struggle which makes for growth in writing ability. The first rapturous conception of a story comes largely by luck; its completion comes by will power.

Choosing relevant incidents.—The most valuable material for a writer to struggle with is, of course, his own, but it is often at first impossible for him to see, in connection with his own story, what incidents are irrelevant or what drawbacks the relevant incidents must avoid. The capacity to see can be cultivated on other people's stories.

In the unsuccessful story just quoted, it is necessary, as previously said, to have a key to the heroine's action before any set of incidents can be pronounced usable or non-usable. Arbitrarily picking one from the trio offered in a preceding paragraph, we may choose to have her a girl essentially timid, ashamed of her timidity and determined to hide it. With this interpretation of her in mind, what are plausible incidents to use in driving home the main idea of the story? The three incidents following were offered by the writer of the story in response to criticism of his original story plan.

(1) On a school picnic, the group of picnicking children come to a fallen log across rapids. The little boys in the group begin daring the little girls to go across. Without looking at the others, Loretta runs across the log and jumps to earth on the other side, only to find that none of the rest, boys or girls, follow. The butt of the log being too high to climb back on, she is left to break her way alone through brambles and willows to the legitimate stepping stones.

(2) At nine Loretta is with her governess at a lake-side summer resort. The governess, wanting to stop her from swinging herself against the railing at the end of the pier, calls after her, "You don't want to do that. You'd be frightened if you found yourself swinging out over those waves." The child immediately catches the rail and swings forward, loses her hold, falls, and is with difficulty fished out.

(3) While Loretta is at boarding-school, a boy from an adjacent school, who has been trying unsuccessfully to make love to her, becomes angry and explains that the reason she refuses to slip out to meet him is that she doesn't dare, she is afraid of being caught. She keeps her appointment that evening by way of the fire-escape, her absence from her room is discovered, and she is sent home.

If these three were included, there would be then a series of five incidents making up the story. Two things wrong with the series are easily evident. One is that four of the five disasters are precipitated by a dare from a boy, and four of the five involve the presence of an audience, one or more, of the girl's peers. If these two conditions are accidental and have nothing to do with the heart of the story, then the accident happens too often. If the two conditions do affect the heart of the story, then, out of a group of incidents as small as five, no exception to them can be afforded. The second thing wrong is that each happening ends uniformly and therefore monotonously in immediate, unqualified disaster.

When they are put into general terms applicable to any story, these "things wrong" come to this:

A repeated tap (such as the presence of a boy as inciter in each episode) is bound to seem important to the reader because of repetition and therefore must either be important or be altered.

Variation of form of happening alone is not variation enough to prevent monotony; variation of effect of happening is needed also.

Next, let us look for a moment at an individual incident instead of at the series. For any one except the author of the story, it is easy enough to see that the governess incident will not serve the story's purpose. The reasons why it will not serve make it an excellent example of the shortcomings peculiar to those happenings invented for a story, not born along with the story idea.

One of these shortcomings, the less important, is denial in this incident of the external conditions evidenced in the incident preceding. Children running errands to butcher shops at seven are not at nine being attended by governesses unless from some notable alteration of circumstance. Such alteration requires to be accounted for, and in being accounted for is likely to cost more in added words and deflected interest than it is worth. A second and more serious difficulty is failure to take account of the chosen conception of the heroine. Everywhere else her recklessness is the result of a dare. Here she is already being reckless when the governess makes her ill-timed suggestion. The suggestion increases the recklessness but does not initiate it.

Criteria for the choice of incidents.—Now how far can this examination of the repetitions, or the lack of them, in a faulty story be made to serve the writer's purpose in dealing with his own? Here are a few of the forms of examination of invented incident which it suggests.

When a story is in course of revision, each incident needs examination to see whether it reflects the same external con-

ditions—of money, of location, of family standing—as the one preceding it.

Each incident needs examination to find whether it imputes to the main character any act denying the characteristic—cowardice, audacity, impulsive generosity—which the story as a whole has chosen to emphasize.

Each incident needs examination to find whether it differs in importance—in the size of its happening—from its predecessors. Incidents may be of continually increasing importance, or they may shift from larger to smaller and back again. What they may not be is all of about the same importance.

Each incident needs examination to find whether it is giving wrong emphasis to the story by accidental echoing from an earlier incident of circumstances not meant to have importance.

None of these examinations, none of these considerations, can help in the actual invention of incident for a story. Where they can help is in deciding which, out of a dozen incidents in mind, can successfully be moulded into a whole. They can help still more by removing from the incidents finally used those false leads and accidental contradictions which keep the puzzled and unconvinced reader from easy understanding of what the writer is trying to tell him.

SUGGESTIONS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION

(1) "The child reader or the childlike reader still enjoys seeing in advance what is coming and being warned that it is identical with something shown before."

Does the story of Red Riding-Hood, as you remember it, give evidence in favor of this contention? What evidence in favor of it is to be found in the Uncle Remus stories?

(2) "Repetition is the means by which a writer forces on his reader the importance of what he is saying."

Enlarge on the statement and illustrate it. Can you find examples which go to disprove it?

(3) "Conception of a story comes largely by luck; its completion comes by will power."

Can will power ever aid in producing the imaginative mood which brings about conception?

If so, in what ways can it aid?

(4) a. In *The Country of the Blind*, what incidents besides the incident of Nunez's stumbling emphasize his physical inferiority to the blind men?

b. In what ways are these incidents varied?

c. What incidents are included in the story to show Nunez's delight in seeing?

(5) a. In *The Man Who Could Work Miracles* the first miracle and the last end in the discomfiture of the miracle worker. Between the first and the last, how often is his inability to control his miracles suggested to the reader?

b. Does the suggestion enhance or detract from the effect of the final catastrophe? Why?

c. By what series of taps is the ineffectiveness of Mr. Mavdig made plain?

d. What is the reason for the continual changes in the importance of the miracles performed?

SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITTEN EXERCISES

(1) Invent an incident for *The Country of the Blind* which shall show Nunez's physical inferiority without exactly paralleling any of the incidents already given.

(2) Invent an incident possible to his situation in which Nunez finds, and proves to those around him, that sight is an advantage.

(3) Choosing one characteristic (such, for example, as the habit of exaggeration), briefly summarize three incidents illustrating it, which incidents could be placed in a college setting.

(4) "Hetty was a Shoulder. Hers was a sharp, sinewy shoulder; but all her life people had laid their heads upon it, metaphorically or actually, and had left there all or half their troubles. Looking at life anatomically, which is as good a way as any, she was preordained to be a Shoulder. There were few truer collarbones anywhere than hers."

Write a scene illustrating this characteristic, the possessor of the characteristic being a cataloguer or desk assistant in a college library.

CHAPTER III

THE TIME

"Once upon a time . . ."

Time Requirements

Suggested Reading: *The Fourth Man*
The Secret Sharer

For the sake of clearness, discussion of time requirements in writing is divided into two parts—first, discussion of the general time laws ruling all writing; second, discussion of time movements in individual passages of a story.

General time laws.—Two time laws govern all writing—exactly the same two which govern all life, and which have, of necessity, been taken over into the fictional presentation of life. One of these is that every act in a story must bear a time relation to every other act; the other, that within a story an act must have such time setting as to show both its general cause and its immediately inciting cause.

Time relations.—The first of these two laws is self-evident and needs, therefore, only a word of comment. The writer's difficulty is not in comprehending it but in finding means for applying it without resultant monotony. Time marks standing out like sign-posts along the course of a narrative are ungraceful, but, on the whole, the plainest time statement is usually the least conspicuous. There is

a good deal to be said for the definiteness of Genesis, which is also the definiteness of a very great number of excellent short stories. Witness John Russell in *The Fourth Man:*

> But at sunrise, as if some spell had been raised by the clang of that great copper gong in the east. . . . Under the heat of the day. . . . By the middle of the afternoon. . . . He succeeded so far that when the wind fell at sunset . . . through that long clear night of stars. . . . It was an evil dawning.

The very simplicity of statement prevents monotony, and the reader is never at a loss for the time setting of the tragic drama he watches.

Causation.—The second time law—that, within the story, an act must show by its time setting both a general cause and an inciting cause—will bear a fuller discussion. Always, the reader of a story requires to know the reason for a thing's happening. Always, he requires to know not only the reason for its happening at all, but also the reason for its happening at one particular instant instead of at another. A reason there must be, and the difference between the working of this necessity in life and in fiction is only that it is the fiction writer's business to make his reason clear. In life, only Richard Roe knows why it was on Thursday instead of on Wednesday that existence, long undesirable, became finally unendurable and must be violently thrust off. In the story of Richard Roe, the reader also must know; he must have that "why" answered. If it is not answered, there is danger almost to the point of certainty of his remaining unconvinced that the thrusting would actually have occurred.

In the amateur story, inciting cause more often than general cause is the one insufficiently stated. It is worth noting, therefore, that the two are seldom identical. In

the case of Richard Roe, the general cause of his act, whether in life or in the story, may well go back to his earliest childhood, and beyond it to the shortcomings of his parents. The inciting cause, the particular impetus leading to action, is a thing less extensive and itself clearly located at some especial time point.

A full-length example of this difference between cause and impetus is found in Anne Parrish's novel *The Perennial Bachelor*. In the ill-fated family with which the story deals, one of the sisters drowns herself because she is emotionally ill-balanced and sexually starved. From the beginning of the book, when we see her as a tiny child, clinging too long, kissing too violently, to the final day of her life, she moves steadily toward her fate. But the reason the final day is final is that, in her morning mail, she finds a comic valentine representing an old maid in pursuit of a man. To have had her drown herself only because she received a comic valentine would, of course, be absurd, but it would be no more absurd than to have had her drown herself without receiving it unless the incident were superceded by something equally definite, equally time-set, and equally related to the victim's central grievance against life.

In Rose Wilder Lane's story, *Innocence*, a Northern family attempts to establish a farm in the heart of a settlement of virulently hostile Southern neighbors. The cause for the family's final flight from their farm is the enmity of those neighbors. That enmity is dramatically displayed a score of times before they are finally driven out. The impetus—the reason for the flight's taking place on one especial night rather than another—is that in the late afternoon preceding that night they have barely frustrated an attempt to poison their only child.

Jack London's *To Build a Fire* deals with a man's solitary journey and final death on an Alaskan trail. The cause for the dilemma which leads to death is the intemperate weather and the man's folly in having come alone on the trail. The impetus launching disaster is one particular misstep which sends him floundering through thin ice into an air-hole.

These three stories may serve as examples of the differences and the necessary relations between cause and impetus. The trio of requirements noted under the first example is a trio never to be slighted. Impetus must always be one specific thing. It has always, therefore, to occur at one specific time. And always it must mirror exactly the important spiritual element in the preceding cause. In actual happening, the suicide in *The Perennial Bachelor* might quite as well have taken place because the victim had been made to realize, by any one of her failures, the burden she was upon her sisters. In actual happening, London's hero might have died from attack of wild animals; the father in *Innocence* might have left his farm because frost or flood, added to hostile neighbors, defeated him. But in any of the three cases, the story would have fallen to pieces under such a change. Impetus had to exemplify the emphasized cause.

Another point: In *The Perennial Bachelor* the final straw is only a straw, a thing in itself trivial. In *Innocence* it is the overwhelming culmination of a series of outrages. As made clear by this contrast, intrinsic importance of impetus has nothing to do with the case. A straw is as good as a heavier weight so long as it is a last straw. A last straw and obviously a last straw it has to be. And here perhaps is a place as suitable as any for setting down a formula which might well be repeated,

in different phrasing, in every chapter of a book on short-story writing.

(*Causes plus impetus must equal effect.*)

The formula turned the other way round should also be fully assimilated in the writer's mind for the testing of his own work.

(*Effect must be the sum of causes plus impetus.*)

The sum. Not less. Not greater. The shortcoming of those stories which have been forcibly turned from tragedy to happy ending or *vice versa* is usually that effect is smaller than causes plus impetus. An avalanche of misfortune and treachery leaves no permanent scar upon the soul of the character concerned. On the other hand, the all too familiar story of business success, where the financially embarrassed hero plays golf with a stranger and is asked offhand to accept a managership in his business, is an example of effect many times larger than causes plus impetus.

In his own story a writer can often detect and remedy minor absurdities by a study of the time setting of the happenings. "What made it happen? What made it happen on that day?" asked persistently, and honestly answered, are questions which bring to his attention surprising gaps between idea in mind and information actually on the page—which point out, too, the foggy places in his own knowledge of his story. If he follow his different persons carefully enough, visualizing them as they walk along the street, staring through his hero's eyes at the desolate night landscape or the shifting expression on the heroine's face, he will presently discover what

is the final push, the little thousandth part of a grain's weight that forces action or checks it.

> For a long time Rhoda was patient with his exactions, but finally her patience wore out, and she decided to go away and seek her own life. So on a morning in January, after he had gone to work, she gathered together the few things she could call her own, drew shut behind her the door she had determined never to open again. . . .

The reader must see a far more specific cause for that shut door than is shown in gradually mounting discontent. If he does not, his belief in the importance of its shutting is likely to be tepid.

Time treatment of individual passages.—In the treatment of individual passages, the writer has but two time scales. He may tell a particular part of his story in summary,

> Thus through all the winter the work went on, and with the coming of spring the boat was ready for launching,

or he may tell it directly, in detailed, moment-to-moment treatment,

> . . . sat up with the darkness thick around her. It was very still. Somewhere through the silence a mosquito droned, a breeze stirred and fell, the light drag of the scrim curtain against the sill sounded through the black. Then she heard it again—the subdued creak of a step on the stairs, a pause, a second creak, a brushing noise as though a heavy coat-sleeve pressed against the wooden paneling.

For convenience, these two ways of telling are referred to hereafter as summary and direct telling.

It goes without more than mention that important action will as a rule be given direct telling, that informa-

tional passages will usually be in summary. What interests the writer is not these self-evident things but the obverse of them—how far the chronicle of unimportant action, given direct treatment, obtains thereby a factitious importance, how far the significance of an important passage can be momentarily obscured by summary, and what effects useful to the story are brought about by these reversals.

Direct treatment.—A set of actions given direct treatment fills necessarily more space than the same set of actions shown in summary. In nearly every avenue of life, amount is one of the measures of importance or at least one of the means of attracting attention. The pedestrian steps over a brick laid on the sidewalk; he does not step over a brick wall. The brick may be accident; the wall, even if it is not in itself important, presages importance at hand, is erected for causing a delay in passage. In the same fashion, bulk of words in a story checks the reader's passage, keeps him longer in the neighborhood of one action. Where this bulk attaches to one of the high minutes of the story, the reason for it is obvious and its treatment will be considered later. For the moment we are concerned with bulk without immediate corresponding cause—with retardation, which moves deliberately over one part of a story not so much for the sake of that part as for the enhancement of what comes later.

Retardation.—Let us consider certain examples of such retardation, each used to a different end.

Melville Davisson Post's *After He Was Dead* begins as follows:

> An hour before sunset the man, who had been at work all day, turned out of the cornfield. He crossed the furrows to the rail fence, with the hoe in his hands. At the bars leading into

the field a squirrel rifle, with a long wooden stock reaching to the end of the barrel, stood against the chestnut post; beside it lay a powder-horn attached to a pouch of deerskin containing bullets. The man set his hoe against the fence. He wiped his hands on the coarse fox-grass growing in the furrows, examined the sun for a moment, then took up the rifle, removed an exploded cap from the nipple, and began to load it.

He poured the black powder into his palm, and bending his palm emptied it into the barrel. The measure of powder was a sufficient charge, but he added to it half the quantity again, emptied into his palm from the horn. Then he took a handful of bullets out of the pouch, selected one of which the neck was squarely cut, and placing a tiny fragment of calico over the muzzle of the rifle, drew out the hickory ramrod and forced the bullet down. He got a percussion cap out of a paper box, examined it, placed it on the nipple, and gently pressed it down with the hammer of the lock.

When the gun was thus carefully loaded the man threw it across his shoulder and, taking the horn and pouch in his hand, left the field. He went along a path leading through a wood to the valley below. Midway of the wood he stopped and concealed the horn and pouch in a hollow tree. Then he continued on his way with the rifle tucked under his arm.

Here the retardation introduced is as nearly pure retardation, pause for the sake of the pause only, as is likely to be found in fiction. The reader gets from the opening paragraphs a sense of the time placing of the story and very little else. The actual action of the passage can be adequately expressed in a sentence. "He left the field, picked up and carefully loaded his rifle, and took his way along a path through the woods." The two or three hundred words additional do nothing for characterization, have no bearing on theme. At the end of them, the rifle-carrier might still turn out hero or villain, the story might deal with justified revenge, with self-immolation in behalf of a cause, with murder. What the additional words do

accomplish is to excite suspense. The reader, delayed by them, knows that important action is to follow the delay, exactly as the spectator at a track meet knows that speed is to follow the crouched immobility of the runners. Direct treatment bespeaks importance. If the importance does not lie immediately in the action of the passage given direct treatment, it must lie in the action for which that passage is a prelude.

Only now and then, however, is a piece of retardation to be found which contents itself with one aim. In Stevenson's *Markheim*, one of the most useful of the retardations is that which occurs just before the moment of the murder.

> The dealer stooped once more, this time to replace the glass upon the shelf, his thin blond hair falling over his eyes as he did so. Markheim moved a little nearer, with one hand in the pocket of his great-coat; he drew himself up and filled his lungs; at the same time, many different emotions were depicted together on his face—terror, horror, and resolve, fascination and a physical repulsion; and through a haggard lift of his upper lip, his teeth looked out.
>
> "This, perhaps, may suit," observed the dealer; and then, as he began to re-arise, Markheim bounded from behind his victim. The long, skewerlike dagger flashed . . .

The physical reactions recorded here are not, taken one by one, especially individual. They might be those of any man about to commit murder and nerving himself for the act. But though they might be any man's, they do none the less give the reader more than merely the pause which presages important action. Along with the sense of significant action impending there is conveyed also an impression of Markheim—of his febrile tension and nervous instability—which is important for the understand-

ing of his later actions. Retardation, that is, is made here to serve a double purpose.

It serves a double purpose, too, in *The Secret Sharer*. Note the paragraphs immediately preceding the mysterious appearance of the stranger at the ship which appearance is, of course, the event on which all the rest of the story is based.

My strangeness, which had made me sleepless, had prompted that unconventional arrangement, as if I had expected in those solitary hours of the night to get on terms with the ship of which I knew nothing, manned by men of whom I knew very little more. Fast alongside a wharf, littered like any ship in port with a tangle of unrelated things, invaded by unrelated shore people, I had hardly seen her yet properly. Now, as she lay cleared for sea, the stretch of her main-deck seemed to me very fine under the stars. Very fine, very roomy for her size, and very inviting. I descended the poop and paced the waist, my mind picturing to myself the coming passage through the Malay Archipelago, down the Indian Ocean, and up the Atlantic. All its phases were familiar enough to me, every characteristic, all the alternatives which were likely to face me on the high seas—everything! . . . except the novel responsibility of command. But I took heart from the reasonable thought that the ship was like other ships, the men like other men, and that the sea was not likely to keep any special surprises expressly for my discomfiture.

Arrived at that comforting conclusion, I bethought myself of a cigar and went below to get it. All was still down there. Everybody at the after end of the ship was sleeping profoundly. I came out again on the quarter-deck, agreeably at ease in my sleeping-suit on that warm breathless night, barefooted, a glowing cigar in my teeth, and, going forward, I was met by the profound silence of the fore end of the ship. Only as I passed the door of the forecastle I heard a deep, quiet, trustful sigh of some sleeper inside. And suddenly I rejoiced in the great security of the sea as compared with the unrest of the land, in my choice of that untempted life presenting no disquieting prob-

lems, invested with an elementary moral beauty by the absolute straightforwardness of its appeal and by the singleness of its purpose.

The riding-light in the fore-rigging burned with a clear, untroubled, as if symbolic, flame, confident and bright in the mysterious shades of the night.

So far as plot is concerned, so far as character or even theme is concerned, two sentences could cover the situation. The speaker's love for the sea, his all but mystical sense of relation to it, are amply exemplified throughout the whole story. What the pause accomplishes is, first, what all retardation accomplishes—it gives opportunity for time and place to impress themselves on the reader's attention, it excites in his mind the expectation of approaching action, much as utter stillness excites the sense of hearing. Added, however, to what all retardation accomplishes, what this particular retardation does is to emphasize the sardonic contrast between safety apparent and danger real, between the placable face of nature and the animosity of man.

Summary treatment.—The use of direct treatment to hold back a story and thereby throw more emphasis on what immediately follows the delay has its obverse in the use of summary to gloss over an important happening, so that the reader shall later be surprised by its significance. In *The Fourth Man*, the two most important facts in the story, as it finally proves, are that the raft is built in a fashion peculiar to the natives of New Guinea, and that, at intervals, the Canaque who is guiding it stretches himself at length on its reed-covered surface. They are disposed of thus:

It was a curious craft for such a venture, of a type that survives here and there in the obscure corners of the world. The

coracle maker would have scorned it. The first navigating pithecanthrope built nearly as well with his log and bush. A mat of pandanus leaves served for its sail and a paddle of niaouli wood for its helm. But it had a single point of real seaworthiness. Its twin floats, paired as a catamaran, were woven of reed bundles and bamboo sticks upon triple rows of bladders. It was light as a bladder itself, elastic, fit to ride any weather. One other quality this raft possessed which recommended it beyond all comfort and safety to its present crew. It was very nearly invisible. They had only to unstep its mast and lie flat in the cup of its soggy platform and they could not be spied half a mile away.

And through that long clear night of stars, whenever the one of the three who lay awake chanced to look aft, he could see the vague blot of another figure—the naked Canaque, who slumbered there apart.

During the night he had stretched himself out on the platform as before, and after a time he had slept. Through the hours of darkness and silence while each of the whites wrestled with despair, this black man had slept as placidly as a child, with easy, regular breathing. Since then, he had resumed his place aft. And so he remained, unchanged, a fixed fact and a growing wonder.

Because of their burial in summarized passages, the two secrets of the story are kept secrets till the end. At the end, there they stand for the benefit of the now enlightened reader.

The method used in *The Fourth Man* is the usual method of the surprise-ending story. Its significances are concealed by removing from important passages the dignity of direct treatment. Not only in the surprise-ending story, however, but in every story which has any element of surprise, that surprise is aided by time adjustments.

If no surprise is intended, the high scene in a story is

usually, of course, presented at length. Even when so presented, however, omissions occur in it. No treatment, though it may be actually moment-to-moment, is ever second-to-second. The fullest treatment is full, too, of tiny gaps—of emphasis thrown on this statement by the elision of that one. And there are cases, though they are rare, where elision of the highest second of all is its most effective method of presentation. When Poe omitted record of the second wherein his hero actually saw what was in the Pit, when Conrad omitted record of that instant in which the secret follower in *Heart of Darkness* grappled with Kurtz, they were acting on this knowledge.

The time plan.—There is perhaps no other part of writing where observation and experiment bring such rapid improvement as in the treatment of time in individual passages. The inexperienced writer revising a story can hardly do better than to check over the passages given direct telling, noting why each deserves that importance and how far the summary preceding it helps it to gain the reader's attention. If a story, vividly conceived, has come out on paper feeble and wandering, it is often useful to make for it a definite time plan, beginning perhaps something after the following fashion:

Scene 1. 10 minutes. Conversation between husband and wife, mixed with wife's thinking, to show—where they live, how they feel about their ranch, the financial pressure that is on them, the wife's anxiety for her husband, her feeling that she is shut out from his confidence, the anxiety of both of them about the weather. Scene ends with wife's seeing a stranger coming up the road.

(Interval—about two hours. Nothing happens in it that needs telling.)

Scene 2. 5 minutes. Just at end of dinner, to which the newcomer has stayed. Mostly wife's thinking, observation, and

action, with some conversation, to show—her certainty that the stranger is holding something over her husband, her dislike of him, his unpleasant and sinister mannerisms as seen through her eyes, his emphasis upon the danger of unfavorable weather to the crop, the husband's tacit refusal to take his wife into his confidence.

(Interval—three or four hours. A short summary of the wife's thoughts while she sits by the window in her bedroom waiting for her husband to come upstairs. The summary is to show how they got into ranching and how both of them hate the financial worry and uncertainty the ranch has brought.)

Such a time plan should be made with an eye to seeing which of the scenes given direct treatment disclose, when thus boiled down, that they cannot justify their importance; which of the summaries have significant things buried in them, or perhaps, instead, have no significance and can be entirely omitted.

It should be emphasized, however, that only in the rarest cases is the making of such a plan, or any other mechanical process tending to fix the story, advisable before the first draft has been roughly written out. Things which bubble up in the mind unexpectedly in the course of thinking out a story are often the most valuable things the story possesses. Until the end is at least dimly in sight, preoccupation with particular questions of structure is likely to check invention.

SUGGESTIONS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION

(1) a. In *The Fourth Man* what is the inciting cause for the knifing of Dr. Dubosc?

b. What is the inciting cause for the quarrel between Dr. Dubosc and Fenayrou?

c. In this second case, is general cause identical with inciting cause?

(2) What is the general cause and what the inciting cause for Nunez's final attempt to escape from the Valley of the Blind?

(3) "The two (general cause and inciting cause) . . . are almost never identical."

a. Can you quote an instance in which they are identical?

b. Can you invent an instance in which they would be?

(4) "An unimportant passage, given direct treatment, can thereby obtain a factitious importance . . . the significance of an important passage can be momentarily obscured by summary."

Apart from the examples quoted in the text, can you illustrate either of these statements from stories you have read?

(5) a. What are some of the different ends noted in the text, to serve which retardation is used?

b. For what purposes other than those noted in the text have you found retardation used?

SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITTEN EXERCISES

(1) Taking from *Significant Contemporary Stories* a summarized passage of about two hundred words, rewrite it (or part of it), giving the rewritten part direct treatment. Comment upon the difference thereby made in the story.

(2) From one of your own stories, take a passage of about two hundred words which, in the story, is given direct treatment, and reduce it to summary.

(3) Write a scene showing a boy (or girl) waiting alone in an outer office until the man to whom he is applying for a position has time to see him. Without entering into the character's mind, make your retardation show the reader what his emotions are.

(4) Either write or copy out from something you have read a scene in which retardation is used to enhance suspense in the seconds just preceding an accident.

Short-Time and Long-Time Stories

Suggested Reading: *The New Dress*
Sir Watson Tyler

Treatment of time in the individual passages of a story is, of course, only one side of the time problem. There is also the question of how much time the whole story is to cover, which is usually the question of finding its right beginning point. The familiar direction from *Alice in Wonderland*, "begin at the beginning, and go on till you come to the end," is less illuminating than it seems, for only the rarest human experiences have beginnings or have ends. They appear, woven into the fabric of life.

In the process of separating them, one or two things are axiomatic. One axiom is that the amount of time shown in direct treatment is necessarily of the briefest. A story covering months or days is either a summary leading to one high minute or else a series of high minutes tied together by summaries. Another axiom is that, once the planning is complete, the shorter the time actually elapsing between beginning and end of a story, the easier its execution. Every time change requires accounting for; every accounting uses words.

Short-time stories.—In a study of the various possibilities of time treatment, let us take first the story of short-time scheme—that limited to a day or less. Such time-limited stories divide themselves into two groups, the one made up of stories showing the events of a typical hour, the other of those showing the events of a crucial hour. The two groups have entirely different approaches to their material and therefore require separate discussion.

The story of a typical hour.—Stories dealing with a typical hour can be briefly disposed of. They come as near as

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any fiction can to escaping from time difficulties altogether. They are cross-section stories, in which the writer is chiefly intent on showing events battering his passive hero, or mood stories, where the writer is interested in showing how his hero's feeling colors events. In either kind, one day, one hour, within very wide limits, is as good as another. In *Mr. Reginald Peacock's Day*, for example, the very point of the story is our certainty that the day before and the day after exhibit Mr. Peacock exactly as does the day chosen. Whether it is his wife's waking him in the morning, or his wife's slamming the door; whether it is the Duke's asking him to have wine or the titled music pupil leaving her violets in his vase, the incident in itself is trivial and without consequences. The purpose of the story is not to show the effect of any particular incident upon past or future, is not to mark a change or intensification in Mr. Peacock's emotions or to picture his meeting of any crisis. It is to display one foible, which same foible almost any hour of his life except a sleeping hour would display with equal fidelity. There is, therefore, no lump of prior information waiting to be dissolved or placed in the story. A reference is included to his marriage —"She had caught him at a weak moment"—but it is a reference expressing mood, not fact, and even if it were spared, no distracting wonder would be established in the reader's mind.

The story of a crucial hour.—In a story dealing with a crucial hour, the position of the hour is exactly reversed. It is chosen because of its difference from every other hour. The difficulty to be faced in presenting it is the difficulty of foreshortening. The crucial hour must be given the foreground, must be made to loom large. Stated in terms of process, the steps in preparation for writing a story

showing a crucial hour are these: first, selection of the hour; next, working it free enough from surrounding hours to admit of its standing alone; after that, distilling into it enough either of universal significance or of statement dealing with the hero's past and future to make it of interest.

The first of these, selection of the hour, lies beyond teaching. Suggestions are made in various chapters of the text which look to general increase in the power of recognizing story material, but directly teachable methods of selection there are none.

The second step, working the hour free from those around it, is usually accomplished in one of three ways:

(1) For experience of his high hour the hero may be placed in a situation geographically and emotionally disconnected from his past and future. In Connell's *The Most Dangerous Game*, the hero falls overboard, swims ashore to a strange island and finds himself sharing it with a man-hunting host. In Aumonier's *A Source of Irritation*, the hero is snatched from the weeding of his English turnip field by an enemy aëroplane, spends his crucial hour in Belgium, and is returned to his turnip field when the hour is over. In either instance, we still need to know something about the hero's past and a good deal about his temperament, or we should be very little interested in his escape in the one case or his return in the other, but the number of things we need to know is sensibly reduced by his violent displacement from his accustomed surroundings.

(2) Precedent events may be made all of one pattern, so that summary of them is brief.

He was thirty-two years old, and he had never married. His adopted father and mother still ruled the farm. For all those

thirty-two years, or for as many of them as he could remember, one unbroken routine had filled his life. To get up before it was light, to eat, to plod through a day's work in the fields, and with the cattle, to plod home at its end, to eat. . . .

Actually, nobody's thirty-two years is lived with that monotony. The reduction of it to terms so simple is a writing device similar in effect to the stage devices which get all the characters into one setting at one time.

(3) The writer may adopt one especial attitude towards the hour of which he writes, presenting other events of the hero's life only as causes or only as effects of the crucial hour. In *Sir Watson Tyler*, Harvey O'Higgins presents the story of the day in which the hero asks his future wife to marry him. His later life—years of it—is thus envisaged:

It is an open secret that he will probably be Lord Coulton when the readjustment of the colonial affairs of the Empire takes him to London. He will be influential there; he has the silent, conservative air of ponderous authority that England trusts. And Lady Tyler is a poised, gracious, and charming person who will be popular socially. She, of course, is of no importance to the Empire. She still looks at Wat worshipfully, without any suspicion that it was she who made him—not the slightest.

I do not know how much of the old Wat is left in him. His silence covers him. It is impossible to tell how greatly the quality and texture of his mind may have changed under the exercise and labor of his gigantic undertakings. I saw him when he was in New York to hear the Coulton orchestra and choir give the Ninth Symphony, to the applause of the most critical. ("The scion of a noble house," one of the papers called him.) And it certainly seemed impossible—although I swear I believe it is true—that the solid magnificences of the man and his achievements were all due to the fact that when he came back from the Janes telephone to confront the expec-

tancy of Alicia Janes, on that Sunday night in 1892, he said, "They want me to bring you to see them" instead of saying, "They want me at home."

Antecedent material in the short-time story.—But whichever of these devices is used, or even if all three are used in one story, one difficulty is still present, though in varying degree. How is it possible to distill into a record of the happenings of one day or one hour enough information and human connection to hold the reader's interest? The problem is the problem of every story dealing with crisis; it is not created, it is only enhanced, by shortness of time. To see a man struggling against storm at sea or facing the hour of discovery of his embezzlement or waiting for news of his election to office is not in itself necessarily interesting, as scores of ineffective and blundering stories have taught most readers. It becomes interesting only under one of two circumstances—if the man is known to us sufficiently to be a person in our eyes and believable in his dilemma, or if, in some subtle fashion, he has been made to simulate ourselves. How is either of these feats to be accomplished in a story limited to the length of an hour or two?

Every writer who has attempted them remembers the ways they are not accomplished—the long delay in getting to his story if necessary information comes in the beginning, the lumpiness resulting from thrusting that same information into the body of the story following a sprightly opening, the medley of confusions which springs from ignoring the past. The favorite amateur beginning is the sprightly one, often of dialogue, followed by a lump of expository material. It has the advantage of getting the story under way; it has the disadvantage of lessening interest almost at the moment when interest is born.

Granting, however, that past material must be brought in, what can be done to lessen the difficulty in the way of using it?

The first step is to lessen its bulk. What is wanted is to obtain interest or sympathy for a character in a certain dilemma with as little space spent as may be in showing the character getting into that dilemma. The most immediate shortcut is to draw upon sympathies in the reader which are already established. This means putting the character's situation in accord either with the reader's experience of life or with what he thinks his observation of life to have shown him.

In *Pictures*, by Katherine Mansfield, we have an example of necessary information reduced by this means until it slides into its place almost invisibly. The crucial minute chosen for the story is the minute when the heroine's partial destitution becomes destitution complete. How are we to be made to believe in the minute or to care about the heroine's meeting it? In the first place, the dilemma itself is comprehensible without explanation. All of us know that lack of work, lack of food, eviction for unpaid rent constitute disaster. What is left, then, is to make us believe in the heroine in relation to that disaster. To show how that belief in the heroine is established, let us contrast *Pictures* with an amateur story, *Salt Bread*, presenting the same general opening situation.

Each story is limited to the course of a day. In each, the day chosen is that in which the heroine has reached the absolute end of her resources. In each, there is an offensive, evicting landlady. Each shows a search for work. In each, the search is unsuccessful. That *Salt Bread* has a fortuitous happy ending and *Pictures* an unhappy one has nothing, at the moment, to do with the case; the ques-

tion of necessary information has had to be answered for both stories long before the ending is in sight. What makes that question readily answerable in the one instance and all but unanswerable in the other, granting that each story is to confine itself to its chosen time limit?

In *Pictures*, the heroine is an itinerant concert singer, a member of a group relatively rootless. She is hearty, youngish, vulgar—no lichen-like quality in her. Her first words, words uttered within ten lines of the beginning of the story, show her to have been in distress long enough to have used up such flimsy resources as she may have had. Her search for work gives evidence, in her familiarity with names and persons and places, of having been long protracted. She is meeting, that is, merely one of the regular difficulties of her profession, except that this one is more than usually acute. And for extra measure, the writer gives her the war and the consequent closing of places of amusement as a reason for being out of work.

Pictures, that is, presents a situation believable because of its accord with our own preconceived opinions. It is the opinion of most people that life as it goes on tends to tie itself to supports. A wholly unsupported individual, therefore, needs explanation. But it is also the opinion, right or wrong, of most people that artists are improvident and pseudo-artists more improvident still. By making her heroine a second-rate concert singer, by setting the scene of her search for work among moving-picture studios and vaudeville employment agencies, the writer quiets in the reader's mind a whole set of questions which would otherwise need answering and which, in being answered, would block the progress of the story.

In *Salt Bread*, on the other hand, the heroine is an

elderly gentlewoman for many years resident in Chicago. When she turns up in the story on the morning of her crucial day, she brings trailing with her a host of interrogations. Let it be emphasized here that the question is not a question of possibility at all. It is a question only of plausibility. So far as possibility goes, it is entirely possible than an elderly gentlewoman long resident in one city might, on some one special day, find herself penniless and set about an undirected search for work. The thing is conceivable, has probably sometimes happened, but it is not one of the usual and predictable and recurrent dilemmas in the lives of elderly gentlewomen. The writer is choosing a special case. To render that special case convincing, he will need to answer many questions of why and how, or else be met on the reader's part by unbelief and the feeling that a vamped-up and unfair assault is being made upon sympathy. If he answer the questions, every answer means a retreat into time prior to the time of the story's opening—means, that is, a lump of information to place or dissolve within the story. Such placing is always difficult, its avoidance always desirable. Some prior information requires admission even in *Pictures*, but that which is necessary in *Pictures* is as nothing to the amount required for *Salt Bread*. In *Salt Bread*, the author explains the heroine's loss of income by putting her income-bearing property in Santa Barbara and destroying it in the earthquake there. So far, so good. But even so, why no insurance, no family, no friends, no pawnable possessions? A six-month time scheme might make plausible what a one-day time scheme leaves merely irritating—a strained attempt at pathos.

If, then, a story is to have a short-time scheme, one way to reduce the size of the necessary lump of fact precedent

is to choose an immediately comprehensible dilemma—poverty, approaching death, the arrival of the author's first acceptance, the birth of the first child—whatever thing has gathered round it a particular set of emotions, to be drawn on without re-statement. Another way is to take a figure in accord with the reader's preconceived opinion of the kind of person to be found in that dilemma, not in opposition to it. A bishop robbing a bank may well make a story, but it cannot be chiefly a story of bank robbing; it must be chiefly a story of bishop.

Granted, however, that, so far as is compatible with the writer's idea, situation and character have been made easily comprehensible, there remain cases, many of them, where the amount of that compatibility is not great. A writer's story is the particular story that writer wants to write. When all the adjustments to the needs of a short-time scheme have been made which can be made without sacrifice of his idea, there yet remain precedent facts to be stated. The difficulties faced in introducing these facts are common to both long-time and short-time stories. Discussion of means for reducing difficulty is placed, therefore, in the last section of this chapter. (See page 63.) The writer should remember, however, in following that discussion, that a story dealing with a crucial hour and yet requiring paragraphs of explanation has almost certainly an ill-chosen time point. No story can be trusted to inspire interest and belief in its readers if the crucial hour it shows is still so firmly tied to other hours as to need prolonged analysis of them before its individual significance can be made plain.

Long-time stories.—In any consideration of the story of long-time scheme, the first of the general time rules should be emphasized. Time must be kept clear. The

reader must know how much time passes from scene to scene. This does not mean, of course, that exact days, hours, and years must be stated. "A day or two later" does very well; so does "It must have been the second or third year after his death that I discovered . . ." But measure of some kind there must be. And no matter how long the time finally covered, the story should fulfil that doubtful direction of beginning "as near as possible" to its central point. "As near as possible," however, may be the length of a lifetime away, or, as in *The Sword and the Idol*, the length of many lifetimes away. If it be, and especially if the story have many scenes, what can time treatment do to diminish scrappiness and dragging?

The prime requirement for a story of many scenes is, naturally, that the scenes themselves be relevant. If they are not, if the writer has not grasped what it is that his course of years or months is to be made to say, then devices are only the bailing of a hopelessly leaky boat.

Time breaks in long-time stories.—Selection of scene having been accomplished, what ways exist by which to give to the reader a sense of passing time, and to make that sense of the passage of time add to the interest of the story?

In *The Persistent Little Fool*, each episode is separated from the next by double spacing—in effect, a chapter break. Within one episode, time is sometimes briefly shifted, from morning to afternoon, from evening till next morning, statement of the shift accompanying it. Where the double space appears, time is always shifted. Its appearance warns the reader without statement that such a shift is coming and that it is a significant one, thus both reducing the chance of monotony and saving words. Chapter breaks in the short story do not, of course,

mark change of time alone. They mark always time plus completion of episode, or time plus shift in point of view, but for either of these double purposes they are space-saving devices which prevent the reader from being even momentarily distracted by finding himself launched on a new day or year.

Almost as simple a device as the chapter break is the device of phrase repetition, especially of repetition of those phrases expressive of time. Lord Dunsany, in *The Sword and the Idol*, is showing the passing of three generations between the inception of the story's action and its climax. He makes the representation by scripturally direct statement, with brief paragraphs of narrative set between.

> Now Loz begat Lo, and in his old age gave the sword to him.
>
> And Lo begat Lod. And when Lo died, Lod took the sword. . . .

In *The Country of the Blind*, Wells accomplishes the same end by exact repetition. "Generation followed generation. Generation followed generation." Only an insensitive reader can fail to feel how many generations in even, unbroken sweep, the reiterated phrase has brought across the page.

These two means of marking time are devices in the full sense of the word. They are adjustments which may be made at any stage in a story's career, which may be consciously made. Far more fundamentally a part of the story is time relation by means of repeated incident or by repeated representation of a character trait. Kipling's *The Brushwood Boy* begins, "A child of three sat up in his crib and screamed at the top of his voice," the cause of his screaming being an over-vivid dream in which figured a policeman. That dream, its policeman meta-

morphosed but recurrent, is the tie which binds together the scattered experiences of the quarter century to follow. "A child of six was telling himself stories as he lay in bed," and presently day-dreaming gives way to night-dreaming. "The movements of the grown-ups, whom Georgie tolerated but did not pretend to understand, removed his world, when he was seven years old, to a place called 'Oxford-on-a-visit,'" where the dream princess is seen in the flesh at his first and dream-like play. "Ten years at an English public school do not encourage dreaming. . . . The regular workings of the Empire shifted his world to India. . . . One peculiarity of his dreams he noticed at the beginning of his second hot weather. Two or three times a month they duplicated," and policeman and heroine and all their attendant retinue are back on the scene, as they are to be with every important time shift up to the final pages wherein daily life and dream life are fused into one.

In Galsworthy's *The Man Who Kept His Form*, even more years than in *The Brushwood Boy* separate the youth of the beginning from the broken man of the end. The episodes in his life are tied together by definite time statement. "Four years later I happened to see . . ." "They went off to Vancouver Island in September. The following January . . ." "How he spent the next eight years. . . ." But along with this means of orientation for the reader is the still greater orientation which comes from each episode's definitely embodying one instance of the kept form, an instance appropriate to the particular period in life which the form-keeper had then reached.

Where time to be covered is long and scenes are many, reminiscent telling will sometimes pull scattering material

together, giving focus and effect to what would, under most treatments, be only a series of ill-connected incidents. Conrad's *The Lagoon*, in which the listening white man hears the native tell the story of his life, is an example. The happenings of years are brought together, unified by their presentation in one narrative at one given time and place, unified, too, by the repeated inclusion of the white listener in the story, by repeated returns to the tragic past. (The telling of a reminiscent story within a setting of narrative or exposition quite disconnected from it, the boxed story, is discussed under Point of View.)

Antecedent material in the long-time story.—But no matter how long the time shown within the story, there are always precedent events to be reckoned with. Even *The Sword and the Idol*, with its three generations, gives up an opening paragraph to them. When elimination and adjustment have done their utmost, what are the least obtrusive means for inserting information?

Examination of stories already written shows four means used often and successfully towards this end. They are (1) frank exposition, close-packed, with no screen of story before it, (2) dialogue wherein one character tells to another that which the reader requires to know, (3) dialogue interpersed with unostentatious bits of author's comment, (4) reminiscent soliloquy, spoken or unspoken, on the part of one of the characters. Examples follow.

(1) Three hundred miles and more from Chimborazo, one hundred from the snows of Cotopaxi, in the wildest wastes of Ecuador's Andes, there lies that mysterious mountain valley, cut off from all the world of men, the Country of the Blind. Long years ago that valley lay so far open to the world that men might come at last through frightful gorges and over an icy pass into its equable meadows, and thither indeed men came, a

family or so of Peruvian half-breeds, fleeing from the lust and tyranny of an evil Spanish ruler. Then came the stupendous outbreak of Mindobamba, when it was night in Quito for seventeen days, and the water was boiling at Yaguachi and all the fish floating dying even as far as Guayaquil; everywhere along the Pacific slopes there were landslips and swift thawings and sudden floods, and one whole side of the old Arauca crest slipped and came down in thunder, and cut off the Country of the Blind forever from the exploring feet of men.

—*The Country of the Blind*

(2) "There's a ship over there," he murmured.

"Yes, I know. The *Sephora*. Did you know of us?"

"Hadn't the slightest idea. I am the mate of her. . . ." He paused and corrected himself. "I should say I was."

"Aha! Something wrong?"

"Yes. Very wrong indeed. I've killed a man."

"What do you mean? Just now?"

"No, on the passage. Weeks ago. Thirty-nine south. When I say a man . . ."

—*The Secret Sharer*

(3) "Mr. Millner? Are you—er—waiting?" the lad asked, with an intention of serviceableness that was like a finer echo of his father's cordiality.

"For my motor? No," Millner jested in his frank free voice. "The fact is, I was just standing here lost in the contemplation of my luck"—and as his companion's pale blue eyes seemed to shape a question: "my extraordinary luck," he explained, "in having been engaged as your father's secretary."

"Oh," the other rejoined, with a faint colour in his cheek. "I'm so glad," he murmured; "but I was sure . . ." He stopped, and the two looked kindly at each other.

Millner averted his gaze first, almost fearful of its betraying the added sense of his own strength and dexterity which he drew from the contrast of the other's frailness.

"Sure? How could any one be sure? I don't believe in it yet!" he laughed out in the irony of his triumph.

The boy's words did not sound like a mere civility—Millner felt in them an homage to his power.

"Oh, yes: I was sure," young Draper repeated. "Sure as soon as I saw you, I mean."

Millner tingled again with this tribute to his physical straightness and bloom. Yes, he looked his part. . . .

—Edith Wharton, *The Blond Beast*

(4) She knew . . . that she was condemned, despised, left like this in a backwater, because of her being like this a feeble, vacillating creature. . . . But it was not her fault altogether, after all. It was being one of a family of ten; never having money enough, always skimping and paring; and her mother carrying great cans, and the linoleum worn on the stair edges, and one sordid little domestic tragedy after another,—nothing catastrophic, the sheep farm failing, but not utterly; her eldest brother marrying beneath him but not very much —there was no romance, nothing extreme about them all. They petered out respectably. . . .

—*The New Dress*

In contrast with the disposal of necessary information in these passages, disposals made by skilled hands, let us observe two less skillful attempts.

(1) Morgan Gray flung aside the medical treatise he had been reading and reached quickly into the desk drawer for his revolver. Whoever was making that racket downstairs . . .

Morgan was the only man in the house. His brother-in-law, Tom, was out on one of his drunken parties again, and Morgan was alone to protect his bride of two weeks and her mother. Marion was safe enough up here, in the next room, but Mother was still down in the library. Morgan thought fondly of those two women, who had shown so much courage and capability in the litigations that followed the death of Dan Wylie, whose estate had been badly tangled up. They had straightened things out, finally. Tom hadn't been much help, Morgan knew. He was too much absorbed in drinking himself to death. He could have been such a splendid chap if he had only tried, with his generous disposition and keen mind.

But Tom wasn't like that. Morgan was. Left at the age

of sixteen with no parents, and with a tremendous inheritance, Morgan had nevertheless gone ahead and studied medicine, until now he was recognized as one of San Francisco's most brilliant physicians, albeit its youngest. Nothing had so far marred his career, and his marriage with Marion Wylie had been of a piece with the rest of his luck, as he would have put it.

Morgan started. There was that noise again. Now Marion was stirring next door. He called to her, "Don't go downstairs. I'll look after Mother."

He grasped the gun firmly and stepped into the hall. It was pitch-dark down there. . . .

(2) "Music!" exploded Larsen, "It's all wrong. All this about the niggers being a musical race—I spent three months down in Africa with my fiddle, playing every kind of music I could think of, and not one of the cursed blacks would listen to me. They go off and pound on their damnable drums, six or seven of them, maybe, beating away whenever they happen to feel like it, and all they get is a terrific racket. They never heard of melody, and couldn't understand it if they did. And if you think they've got rhythm, go down there and listen to them. All the music they can respond to is plain and simple noise."

The last time I had seen Larsen he had been enthusiastic, completely absorbed in his great experiment. He was a musician and a scientist, and was embarking for Africa to study the negro race. He had visioned himself playing before these primitive people—holding them spellbound, exciting them to violence, controlling their emotions with the bow of his violin as an Indian snake charmer controls his serpents. But though he could draw tears from a concert audience in New York, the simple people whom he expected to impress received him blankly and coldly, and returned to their tom-toms. Larsen was disappointed and bitter.

That both passages are badly planned as well as badly written is easily evident. Each is an extreme case, but, taken together, they illustrate the two kinds of error in time treatment most frequent in amateur work.

In the first, the writer has chosen a minute of high interest for beginning his story. Having, as he hopes, compelled the reader's attention by the initial action of the hero, he then turns to making clear precedent conditions. His purpose is excellent. The flaw in his execution is that action necessarily so swift cannot be spread over paragraphs without becoming ridiculous. An opening point set fifteen minutes earlier might go far towards changing a ridiculous story into an effective one. Morgan's folding up a sheaf of legal papers with a sense of thankfulness over the completed litigation, his glancing at the clock with an impatient wonder as to his brother-in-law's whereabouts, his rousing from study to realize the intrusion of a half-heard noise upon the intense quiet of the house—by introduction of the significant trivialities filling a quarter of an hour, the writer can give the information later necessary and can also make his hero a person already interesting to the reader at the time he faces danger.

The second faulty example can best be studied in connection with the second or third example of the set preceding. Information is to be given and dialogue is indicated, though it is not actually shown. By breaking up the opening monologue, making what now is compressed into a half-minute of uninterrupted speech spread over the length of a conversation, the present disconcerting lumpiness of the story can be avoided. Even then, the story would probably not be effective, for what the reader is asked to believe can hardly fail to strain his credulity, but the inherent absurdity of Larsen's attitude and prior actions would at least be less obvious.

For testing the suitability of the time point chosen for opening his own story, there is one device which the writer

will probably find useful, though by no means infallible. This is the device of acting out his opening scene. Sitting in such a position, holding such a book, facing such an imaginary companion, can he perform the required action with the required pauses, speak the required words? Or does he know at once, when he visualizes his situation, that speed of telling is inherent in it and pauses for the giving of information impossible? that no companion imaginable could receive in silence the bolt of information shot at him?

SUGGESTIONS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION

(1) a. What is the author's probable reason for opening *The New Dress* at the particular time point shown?

b. Would the dilemma in *The New Dress* come under the head of an "immediately comprehensible" dilemma?

c. Is the information concerning prior happenings included because it is necessary to an understanding of the story or for the sake of emphasizing the heroine's character?

(2) a. How is the "lump of fact precedent" disposed of in *Sir Watson Tyler?*

b. How is it in *The Secret Sharer?*

c. How is it in *The Fourth Man?*

d. Which, if any, of the three should you say presented an immediately comprehensible dilemma?

(3) What four ways are named in the text for including in the story information concerning happenings prior to the story's opening? Can you suggest other ways?

(4) "The prime requirement for a story of many scenes is that the scenes themselves be relevant."

Explain what is meant by a "relevant" scene. Give examples from your reading.

(5) "Another axiom is that, once the planning is complete, the shorter the time actually elapsing between beginning and end of a story, the easier its execution."

Is there any type of story with which you are acquainted that seems to disregard this axiom?

SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITTEN EXERCISES

(1) "There is also the problem of how much time the whole story is to cover, which is usually the problem of finding its right beginning point."

Selecting one story from those read thus far in *Significant Contemporary Stories*, choose for it a beginning point other than the one used and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of your choice.

(2) "Such time-limited stories divide themselves into two groups, the one made up of stories showing the events of a typical hour, the other of those showing the events of a crucial hour."

a. Explain, in your own words, the difference between a typical hour and a crucial hour.

b. Write the opening paragraphs of a story which is to deal with a typical hour.

(3) Make a time scheme for the original story on which you are at work. (An example of time scheme is given on page 48.)

(4) Note three possible beginning points for one of your own stories and explain why you chose the one you did choose.

CHAPTER IV

THE UNDERLYING IDEA

Suggested Reading: *The Sword and the Idol*
Uncle Giles

Ye who listen with credulity to the whispers of fancy, and pursue with eagerness the phantoms of hope; who expect that age will perform the promises of youth, and that deficiencies of the present day will be supplied by the morrow; attend to the history of Rasselas, prince of Abyssinia.

—Samuel Johnson.

Most stories, and all significant stories, accomplish two things. They picture certain individual lives and at the same time they shadow forth something larger than those lives, some general conception of human existence, some outline of great events. In Doctor Johnson's one great story, *Rasselas*, this shadow is cast by the philosophic conception embodied in the narrative, a conception specifically set forth in the story's opening paragraph. In Kipling's story, *The Man Who Was*, the shadow wavering, many times larger than life-size, back of the individual actors is that of empires busy with strategy or war. The figures in the Conrad stories, are, in general, luminous with destiny. In *Youth*, for example, the action of the individual youth is important to the reader, but what is more important is his symbolizing of all youthfulness.

In each of the instances given, the story draws a notable part of its significance from the fact that it represents as well as presents. We are concerned with the individuals

in the story for themselves, but we are concerned with them, too, either as representatives of ourselves or as spokesmen for their class or race or nation.

Person and shadow.—Where the chief emphasis falls —whether on presentation or on representation, on person or on shadow—determines the type of story produced. When the shadow is notably more interesting than the individual figures, the thematic story results. When it is all-interesting, the result is allegory. In such a story as Addison's *The Vision of Mirza*, the philosophic conception is highly important, the individuals are featureless. In such a story as Ring Lardner's *Katie Wins a Home*, the individual happenings and figures are important, the shadow of the slightest. None the less, every story contains the two in one proportion or another, which is only to say that, whether he wills it or not, a writer is always engaged in recording his belief about life as well as his observation of it.

The more writer he is, the more significant both or either will be. In the two examples just given, *The Vision of Mirza* and *Katie Wins a Home*, one interest possesses the field almost to the exclusion of the other; but this is not necessarily true of other short stories. Interest in general conception and interest in individual happening are not, like sand and salt, incapable of occupying the same space. Both interests may be increased, within the limits of some thousands of words, without interference the one with the other—as, for example, in *The Fourth Man*, where characters are highly individualized, and yet where underlying idea is never jeopardized.

Nature of the underlying idea.—In any discussion of the importance of the underlying idea in a story, three

things should be stated at the beginning, as nearly simultaneously as may be, since all three need to be in the writer's thoughts while any one of them is enlarged upon. Put into briefest dogmatic statement, the three are these:

(1) *The underlying idea of a story is never original.*

(2) *The underlying idea of a story need not be true.*

(3) *A story may embody more than one underlying idea.*

Lack of originality in underlying idea.—First, the underlying idea of a story is never original. The tissue of incident which makes up the story is, or may be, the invention of the author; the underlying idea never is. It is always the creation of long time and the possession of a group. A parallel case is found in the making of a proverb. No one ever invented a proverb. Some one person may originate the wording, but the idea obtains proverbial value only through its being the crystallization of many experiences. "A stitch in time saves nine" stays in mind and is repeated less because of the near-rhyme than because of wide-spread experience of that untaken stitch. In the same fashion and for the same reasons, an underlying idea in a piece of fiction must always be an expression of widespread experience or widespread belief. "A little child shall lead them" gets its place as foundation stone for thousands of stories because millions of people have experienced that leading and millions more have accepted its existence from accumulated hearsays—an acceptance not disturbed by occasional contrary observations. Given that a writer could—he never can—make up his underlying idea out of his own brain, he would by that very act render his story incomprehensible. A piece

of fiction, analyzed, yields always a familiar concept at its core.

Truth or untruth in underlying idea.—Second, the underlying idea of a story need not be true. When we say a story is true, we mean, if we leave the words unqualified, that its outer happenings, its comings and goings, have actually taken place. When we say an idea is true, what do we mean? Obviously either that it agrees with our individual observations of life or else that it agrees with the consensus of opinion in our own times. We can mean nothing else.

But in the matter of deductions drawn from individual observations any one who has observed the working of his own mind knows that, in many fields, "true" for him varies not only with shifts in knowledge but still more with shifts in feeling and especially with reference to the nearness and poignancy of some particular event. "God's in His Heaven; all's right with the world" is true to certain moods. "The God who shapes the tortured flesh, and damns the babe unborn" is for the moment quite as true to other moods. The two truths cannot exist in the same mind at the same moment, but they can take alternate possession of the same mind, neither disturbing the other for the period of its tenancy. In the matter of the world's opinion, the same thing holds good. Notoriously, every proverb is a crystallization of human belief. Notoriously, too, every proverb has its counter proverb. "Soft words butter no parsnips"—"A soft answer turneth away wrath." "Look before you leap"—"Slow choosers are losers." Either proverb of either pair is a truth of partial application, momentarily dominant.

Momentary truth is necessary to the underlying idea of a story, but it is the only kind of truth necessary to it.

It must be true to some persons in some moods, no more, though obviously the larger the accepting group and the longer the acceptance, the greater effect, other things being equal, the story will have.

It should be noted here that underlying ideas are lasting things. Some of them seem to be everlasting. None the less, changing conditions do now and then retire an underlying idea, exactly as changing conditions now and then retire a proverb, rendering it so manifestly false that it can no longer attain to even qualified acceptance. And since there are always some on the edge of retirement, the entrance of such a one into a story creates an especial problem for the writer. Examples of these and discussion of the difficulties they cause are given later in the chapter.

More than one underlying idea.—Third, a story may successfully embody more than one underlying idea. When it does, however, a particular series of relations must exist among those ideas. They must, first of all, be not immediately contradictory. "Pride goeth before destruction" and "A high horse overrides misfortune" may both pass for true at different times with one reader, but they cannot both pass for true in the course of one story. Further, underlying ideas must lie within the story not like blocks in a box, side by side, but one below the other, like skins on an onion, so that momentarily the first conceals the second. (And the later of the underlying ideas must play upon the earlier, must enlarge it, enforce it, reveal a face of it previously unseen or, more rarely, so distort it as to make it mean something quite other than it seemed to mean at first reading.)

Underlying idea and moral.—In connection with the presence of more than one underlying idea in a story it

may be profitable to notice that "underlying idea" and "moral" are by no means synonymous. A moral, to be sure, is an idea underlying the story, but an underlying idea is by no means always a moral, for a moral not only records a conception of life but also suggests something to be done about life. Thus, when we finish *Waste Not, Want Not*, we know, among other things, that we should untie the string around a package instead of cutting it. When we finish *The Vision of Mirza*, we have no such definite residuum. "The paths of glory lead but to the grave" may perhaps be considered a moral and might possibly influence action, but "Vanity, vanity, all is vanity," which has served quite as often for a story's foundation, is a conception not applicable, only ponderable.

Examples of the use of underlying idea.—In *The Outcasts of Poker Flat*, the figures presented are a gambler, a sluice-box robber, two disreputable women, and two young innocents, boy and girl, who, as they are eloping to be married, fall in with the quartette by accident. The narrative dealing with them goes on to illuminate the "so much good in the worst of us" which has found a place in as much fiction as has its obverse, "so much bad in the best of us," emphasizing on its way the underlying idea "appearances are deceitful." In this story the underlying idea answers to all three of the conditions just set forth. It is not original; any reader can find in memory stories and sermons which exemplify it. It is a truth, but only a partial truth. The reader is prepared to accept appearances as deceitful in this story because they are sometimes so, just as in another story he accepts them as conclusive because they are sometimes that. And as the story proceeds, this first underlying idea

proves to be not the only one. A little later the reader is aware of another: "Trustful innocence can change guilt to its own likeness." The two do not interfere with the reader's progress through the story, because trustfulness is the instrument piercing through appearance of evil to the heart of gold. The second idea, therefore, helps the first. The two together cause the story to cast a shadow much larger than the mere reflection of its individual figures. And because both ideas are easily at home in a multitude of minds, and because the shadow they cast is of highly optimistic tint, they serve to account in large measure for the story's continued popularity through three quarters of a century.

Hawthorne's story *David Swan*—the story of the youth who, taking a nap by the roadside, is approached while he sleeps and is finally left behind, still asleep, by love, by fortune, and by death—is an excellent example of trivial incident vivified and given lasting effect by underlying idea. His even better known story, *The Ambitious Guest*, has its foundation in an idea at home at one time or another in every human mind.

The stories thus far quoted, by the way, are all serious. It should be emphasized that discoverable underlying idea in a story does not in the least predicate seriousness. "One every minute" has had even more frequent humorous exemplifications in fiction than it has had tragic ones.

Testing the underlying idea.—When the writer turns from consideration of other stories back to a study of his own, his first task is, of course, to decide what shadow, if any, he is trying to have his story cast. It should be emphasized and re-emphasized that this decision, like nearly all the teachable decisions connected with story writing, is one to be made in revision, not in first draft. Unless

a story comes to mind as a philosophic conception—as, for example, *The Sword and the Idol* probably came—it is possible for it to reach completion without the author's ever considering its shadow at all. And in some stories such consideration is never profitable, so all-important are the individual happenings, so slight their general significance.

But if the first draft of a story is inconclusive and generally feeble, that feebleness may quite possibly spring from its possession of outworn underlying ideas or of incompatible underlying ideas. In either instance, these may have shadowed themselves forth in the story without the writer's conscious realization, even against his earlier purpose, in his struggle to find incidents.

As an example of the outworn underlying idea, consider the following summary of a student story:

A young girl is courted by two brothers, one gay, attractive, unstable, the other serious, silent, dependable. She warmly likes both, sometimes one better, sometimes the other, according to her mood, but is not conscious of a continued preference for either. On the occasion of a picnic, she loses a dearly valued ring, a keepsake from her dead mother. All three hunt for it, the girl in increasing distress. When the darkness puts an end to their immediate search, the loquacious brother asks her what reward she will give to the finder—whether she will marry the one that brings her the ring. She promises to do so. Next day he telephones her that he has found the ring (the reader knows that he has had it all the while) and is coming to claim her promise. In the interval before his arrival, she realizes with conviction that it is the other brother she loves, has loved without knowing it throughout. None the less, she has promised, and promise-keeping is a tradition of her upbringing, one bound up with her memory of, and reverence for, her mother. She puts aside her own feeling and goes down to accept her lover. The story ends as she comes to meet him.

Here the various incidents were given vivacity and interest but the implausibility of the underlying idea is sufficiently obvious to spoil even a skillful treatment of incident. Its weakness is its assumption that, in the minds of readers, "a promise once given is inviolable" is still an accepted tenet. Apparently there was a time in the history of fiction when this assumption might safely have been made, but that time is long past.

Changes in custom and tradition are continually, though slowly, at work outlawing underlying ideas which previously have served for story bases. How shall the writer find whether, in his attempt to account for a situation which has seized his imagination, he has fallen back unconsciously on one of these outlaws? Perhaps the easiest way towards finding out is to summarize his story, not its action but its philosophic content, in as brief an abstract statement as he can manage, and studying this statement, decide whether he does himself believe in its assertion. The statement, by the way, must necessarily take its form in declarative sentences—better still, in one declarative sentence. The action of a story may end in an interrogation; the theme on which that action is based cannot. There is no story to be made out of "Is honesty the best policy?" though that very question, with no solution in sight, may be left at the story's end in the mind of the main character.

Incompatible underlying ideas, whether contradictory or simply unrelated, may be detected in the same fashion. If, as happened in a recent college story, the story, boiled down, presents itself in a declarative sentence reading somewhat after this fashion,

> Colleges, which pretend to be the cultivators of thought, actually suppress thought in their students in the interests

of a parrot-like repetition of professorial pronouncements, *and* he who sacrifices greatly for an ideal cannot be deprived of his reward, for the knowledge of sacrifice ungrudgingly made is in itself a reward.

then it is quite clear that no unified narrative can result. The boiling-down process has disclosed two ideas, one of which must be abandoned or rigidly subordinated.

But discovering a flaw in an underlying idea is easier than escaping from it. An outworn underlying idea may now and then be rejuvenated by shifting the story back to the period when the idea was not outworn. Medieval surroundings legitimatize medieval ideas, though only rarely is the result worth the effort. From contradictory or unrelated underlying ideas there is no escape. Nothing but elimination of one idea or the other can give coherence. Such elimination means an entire reconsideration of material and a re-decision on the writer's part as to what it is he is trying to tell—a feat usually more difficult than was the first shaping of the material. If the time scheme of a story is faulty or its point of view ill-chosen, re-shaping is both a valuable exercise in itself and likely to produce a notably improved story. If the underlying idea is at fault, an attempt to mend it may be valuable as practice, but its value is that it teaches something to be applied to other stories, not that it rescues the one under consideration. The underlying idea is so integral a part of a story that discovery of weakness in it after a story is actually drafted usually means abandonment of the story in question in favor of some more promising piece of work.

SUGGESTIONS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION

(1) Define the term "underlying idea."

(2) "In Kipling's story . . . the shadow . . . is that of empires busy with strategy or war."

Are you familiar with any other Kipling story of which the same assertion would be true?

(3) "We are concerned with the individuals in the story . . . as representatives of ourselves."

Explain, and illustrate from any story you have read.

(4) "The underlying idea of a story is never original. The underlying idea of a story need not be true. A story may embody more than one underlying idea."

Re-state the discussion of these three points given in the text.

(5) ". . . changing conditions do now and then retire an underlying idea. . . ."

a. Give an example of an outworn underlying idea other than the ones quoted in the text.

b. By what test do you decide it to be outworn?

(6) ". . . underlying idea in a story does not in the least predicate seriousness."

What humorous story do you know which contains a clearly defined underlying idea?

(7) a. In either *The Sword and the Idol* or in *Uncle Giles*, is the underlying idea also the moral?

b. By what test do you determine the answer to *a*?

SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITTEN EXERCISES

(1) Make a list of proverbs and near-proverbs which, in the course of your own reading, you have found used as bases for stories.

(2) a. Using any proverb with which you are familiar as its basis, sketch the plan for a serious thematic story.

b. Using the same proverb, sketch the plan for a humorous thematic story.

(3) ". . . which is only to say that, whether he wills it or not, a writer is always engaged in recording his belief about life as well as his observation of it."

Choosing one short-story writer with whose work you are reasonably familiar, discuss what seems to you to be his "belief about life" as illustrated in his stories.

CHAPTER V

THE POINT OF VIEW

One detail of the mechanism remained to be arranged, and this ended by deciding the whole form of the story, and the first-person character of the recital. This was the question of just how it would have been materially possible for the bed-ridden old woman to break down the life-long barrier between her and her sister, and how she could have reached her effectively and forced her hand. I could see no way to manage this except by somehow transporting her bodily to the sister's house, so that she could not be put out on the road without public scandal. This transportation must be managed by some character not in the main action, as none of the persons involved would have been willing to help her to this. It looked like putting in another character, just for that purpose, and of course he could not be put in without taking the time to make him plausible, human, understandable . . . and I had just left out that charming widower for sheer lack of space. Well, why not make it a first-person story, and have the narrator be the one who takes Mrs. Purdon to her sister's? The narrator of the story never needs to be explained, always seems sufficiently living and real by virtue of the supremely human act of so often saying "I".

—Dorothy Canfield, *How "Flint and Fire" Started and Grew*

The Third-Person Story

Suggested Reading: *The Leech*
The Killers

Point of view in a story is that point from which, as regards his characters, the author presents his material.

The passage which heads this chapter is given its place to emphasize the fact that what this point is to be is not necessarily a thing decided when the story is born. Unlike the underlying idea, change in which means abandonment of one story and substitution of another, point of view is frequently an alterable thing. Most stories can be told, and told successfully, from any one of two or three angles, though probably no two of those two or three will have similar effects upon a reader.

Among possible points of view, the first main division is, of course, that between first person and third. Leaving first-person treatment for later discussion, let us consider the four principal forms of third-person treatment—objective treatment, treatment through location in the mind of a character, treatment through observation of the character's stream of consciousness, treatment through omniscient observation of characters.

Objective treatment.—Objective treatment is the first and the least inclusive of the third-person points of view.

In the bright light of the entrance to the tube they came almost face to face, and the clergyman took a good look at her. Certainly she was a decent-looking old body, if any woman was: white-haired, wrinkled, spectacled, and stooped. A poor but thoroughly respectable domestic servant of the better class she looked, in her old black hat, neat veil, and gray shawl; and her brief glance at the reverend gentleman was precisely what it should have been from her to him—deference itself. Nevertheless, he, going more slowly down the draughty steps, continued to study her from behind with a singular intentness.

An express was just thundering in, which the clergyman, handicapped as he was by his clubfoot and stout cane, was barely in time to catch. He entered the same car with the woman, and chanced to take a seat directly across from her. It must have been after twelve o'clock, and the wildness of the

weather was discouraging to travel. The car was almost deserted. Even here under the earth the bitter breath of the night blew and bit, and the old woman shivered under her shawl. At last, her teeth chattering, she got up in an apologetic sort of way, and moved toward the rear of the car, feeling the empty seats as she went in a palpable search for hot pipes.

—Henry Sydnor Harrison, *Miss Hinch*

In these two paragraphs the writer not only remains outside the action of his story, as in all third-person presentations; he remains outside the minds of both of his characters as well. What he records is only what any observer so located that he could closely watch the pair might also record. He is a seeing eye, a hearing ear, and no more. Information is presented in exactly the fashion in which information is obtained in daily life—by looking, by listening, by drawing conclusions from things seen and heard.

The same method of telling is used in Kipling's story, *At the End of the Passage*. From its nonchalant beginning, "Four men theoretically entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness sat playing at whist" to its cryptic closing quotation, the author departs from the merely observant attitude only twice "The players were not conscious of any special regard for each other. They squabbled when they met, but they ardently desired to meet. . . . They were lonely folk," and "Hummil turned on his heel . . . and the first thing he saw standing in the veranda was the figure of himself. He had met a similar apparition once before." Except for these two passages, with their relatively insignificant additions to the reader's knowledge, Kipling stays steadily outside of his characters' minds. He does not choose to interpret his people. He chooses only to show them as among themselves they ask and answer and act.

In each of the two stories, then, the point of view is one which calls for continual self-restraint, for practical self-elimination on the author's part, who, of course, in his own mind knows what those imaginary people of his are thinking and why they think it. In spite of this knowledge, he allows himself entrance into nobody's thoughts, he allows himself no expression of opinion, he permits no reflection visible to the reader to fall upon the happenings as a result of their passage through his mind. What benefit is obtained by this restraint? What is there about the material in either story which makes this an advantageous point of view from which to treat it?

With *Miss Hinch*, one answer is easily made. An evident advantage is the advantage relating to plot. The story is a detective story, detective and criminal battling against each other. By staying outside his characters and treating them with equal casualness, the writer can leave the reader in doubt to the last moment as to which of the two is criminal and which is detective. That doubt is what keeps the reader following the turns of the story.

At the End of the Passage, however, presents a different case. Here there is no plot advantage to be sought. The story is particularly concerned with mental suffering, and yet in a story so concerned, Kipling has chosen a point of view which forbids him to offer any knowledge of that suffering except what is obtained through the speech of a man almost inarticulate and through the eyes of a man only now and then on the scene. Why such a choice? And what is it in this treatment of this material which makes its effect so powerful?

As with *Miss Hinch*, a study of the story shows one immediate answer, though not the only one. What

Kipling has secured in the first instance by his use of objective treatment is a readier credulity on the reader's part. The story sounds credible because it is told as though the teller were watching and recording, not as though he were interpreting and thereby leaving leeway for misinterpretation.

It is true that all supernatural stories demand the establishment of credulity in one measure or another, and Kipling has told many, most of them in the first person. There is, however, one notable difference between the demand made on the reader by *At the End of the Passage* and the demand made by Kipling's other treatments of the supernatural. *At the End of the Passage* draws on no belief already established in the reader's mind. Kipling's other ghost stories, and indeed most ghost stories, do depend largely on such belief. In *The Phantom 'Rickshaw*, for example, the hero, who tells most of the story, is haunted because he has sinned. In *The Return of Imray*, told by a minor character, murder has been done, and the house where the body is concealed is haunted till the crime is discovered. In both cases the stories appeal to convictions for which the groundwork is already laid in the mind of almost any reader. But in *At the End of the Passage*, no delinquency of the hero's contributes to his fate, no crime has been committed in his house, no evidence of crime has been hidden there. It takes, therefore, an extra measure of preparation to lead us to accept the conclusion the story presents—the conclusion that neither his harmlessness nor his active goodness has been able to protect the man from supernatural foes.

In *At the End of the Passage*, then, an immediate purpose of objective treatment is establishment of belief. In *Miss Hinch* it is concealment of plot. But in the short story

one purpose is rarely enough. A device has usually to be like the space-saving furniture in a one-room apartment —at once bed and writing desk and umbrella rack. Objective treatment, in both of the cases noted and apparently in every case where it is used, does more than conceal plot, does more than advance credulity. At the same time, it mutes emotion.

This is not to say that it destroys emotion in either story. It does not. But it does allow it to accumulate, hold it in check, till the story is done. If another Kipling story, *The Mark of the Beast*, is recalled in conjunction with *At the End of the Passage*, the effect of different points of view upon material not essentially dissimilar in power of exciting emotion is apparent. *The Mark of the Beast* is told in the first person. At every crisis the teller emphasizes that crisis by analyzing his own feeling, by commenting on the evidences of feeling shown by his companion. The howl of a wolf sounds through the room, and in answer to the howling the teller's heart "stopped as though a knife had been driven through it." A second ominous sound leaves him "sick—actually and physically sick." The teller's companion is "as white as the table-cloth" while he listens to the same sounds. In *At the End of the Passage*, on the other hand, whatever emotion is present in the doctor's mind as he watches the hero and listens to his story is emotion which the reader must deduce for himself, not emotion given statement and place in the story.

Rewriting a paragraph or two from *At the End of the Passage*, giving the story either first-person treatment or third-person treatment with entrance into the minds of one or more of the characters, is an exercise well worth the time it takes. No matter what the change made in point

of view—whether the point of view chosen is first person with the doctor as teller, third person with entrance into the doctor's mind, or third person with entrance into the hero's mind—the result is equally illuminating. In the rewritten version, the reaction of the teller towards his material, or the exhibition of emotion in the mind of a character in the story, invites the reader to an immediate consciousness of his own emotion. In the original version, the straight sweep of the telling, pausing for no reflections and no enlargement, holds emotion well in leash till the end.

In *Miss Hinch*, the same result is obtained. Neither the death of the detective nor the arrest of the murderer awakens feeling on the reader's part for the character concerned. Emotion is held in check during the course of the story, to be released all at once at its end in precisely the one chosen direction, the direction of triumph that the detective's dead hand has clutched its prisoner.

Location in the mind of a character.—In the greater number of stories, things seen by the eye and things heard by the ear are inadequate to convey the story. In the greater number, too, it is the writer's purpose to stress emotion along the way, not to mute it till the end. In the excerpt given below, the writer places himself in the mind of the main character.

"I don't fancy it will be as hot to-morrow," Elizabeth Hewitt said, half musingly. "There's a cloud or two in the sky. . . a bit of high fog, I think."

George Hewitt left his iced tea to chill further as he joined his wife at the edge of the porch.

"Well, if it's only fog . . ." His voice trailed off into chilling significance.

She let her glance sweep the cloud-flecked heavens and fall

appraisingly upon the continuous lines of tree-tops sliding down the hillside. Below them stretched the famous prune-orchards of the Santa Clara Valley, miles and miles and again miles of faded greenery seared to a note of yellow by the prolonged drought of a California summer. Upon the trays, between the trees, a plum-purple harvest shriveled to blackness under the sun's hot gaze.

"Oh, it simply won't rain!" she insisted. "And even if it did, the first rain of September never lasts—a mere sprinkle doesn't do any harm. Drying prunes aren't quite that delicate."

He said nothing. She felt sure that her bravado had not convinced him. She wondered whether it had convinced herself, but she had whistled so many times through the graveyard of his anxieties that she had ceased to take account of her own fears.

—*The Leech.*

The story from which the excerpt is taken is, in effect, a first-person story, except that "she" is used instead of "I." The point of view chosen at the beginning is kept throughout, the writer taking no advantage not offered by it, seeing only what his character can see, hearing only what his character can hear, drawing only those deductions possible to that character's incomplete knowledge. In a story of this kind, the teller accepts the limitations of first-person telling while denying himself the extra authenticity which accompanies the use of "I." What is gained in return for what is given up?

In the first place, location in the mind of the main character tends to center interest on that character and to make the story one of mental struggle rather than one of external event. Where, in the excerpt from *Miss Hinch*, the reader is chiefly interested in what is happening, in this later excerpt he is chiefly interested in how the character feels about what is happening. His interest in and sympathy for the character are excited as they could not be if

that character were not put at the reader's mercy by exhibition of the inside of its mind—its unspoken fears, its misjudgments, its weaknesses.

The advantage of this stimulation of sympathy is obvious. If, however, the writer is to be identified with one character, never to leave it for the length of the story, never to know or say or feel anything outside that character's range, what is the drawback to calling that character "I"? "The narrator of a story," Mrs. Fisher reminds us, "never needs to be explained, always seems sufficiently living and real." But when narrator is important actor as well, there is a heavy drawback to naming that actor "I." In the first place, if the story involve the main character in dangers, suspense on the reader's part is lessened by the knowledge that he escaped to tell about them. In the second place, the "I" in a story can tell no good of himself unless he tell it for the sake of making himself ridiculous, cannot draw out and intricately examine his own mental processes unless the examination is to excite scorn. Location in the mind of a character called "he" allows for that character's taking an important part in action, possessing and displaying courage, subtlety, magnanimity. Location in the mind of a character called "I" ordinarily limits the character to an onlooker or offers him instead the position of buffoon or dupe. It should be noted in passing that there are one or two kinds of material to which this limitation does not apply, but in general, such added effort in the establishing of authenticity as is entailed by the avoidance of "I" is balanced, and more than balanced, by the enlarged field of action and emotion made possible by use of the third person.

Thus far, we have considered only location in the mind of the main character. When the location which the

writer chooses is in the mind of a minor character, the difference between calling that minor character "he" and calling him "I" is far slighter, and since only one discussion of such location seems necessary, that discussion has been included in the consideration of the first-person story.

Observation of the stream of consciousness.—In *The Leech*, identification of author with character is complete. The author lives consistently in one mind, that of his heroine. By definition, therefore, it would seem that this point of view and the point of view involved in the so-called "stream-of-consciousness" story were the same. As a matter of fact, however, the two are far apart. In the stream-of-consciousness story the author is indeed inside the mind of his main character, but he is not identified with that mind. Instead of using his location for the watching of outside events, what he is watching is the mind itself. He is looking not out but in. He does, of course, observe the movement of the mind under stimulus from the outside, but it is the movement, not the cause of movement, which interests him. This difference in center of interest makes a difference in the presentation of all the happenings in the story. In the third-person story quoted below outside events are in the main presented impartially.

> She switched on the lights, arranged the newspapers which were scattered over the rug by her husband's chair, shut out a sharp draft of air from the adjoining room with a quick drawing together of draperies. The men sat down, settling themselves comfortably.

So the thing was. Exactly so another character in the story might report it. It is a set of happenings which the author expects his reader to accept as fact. In *Mr. Reginald Peacock's Day*, or *The New Dress*, on the other

hand, no record is a fact record. No event, whether minute or large, is recorded at all until after it has not only entered the observed mind, but has taken on the color of that mind.

> And Mrs. Holman, who could never get enough sympathy and snatched what little there was greedily, as if it were her right (but she deserved much more, for there was her little girl who had come down this morning with a swollen knee-joint), took this miserable offering, and looked at it suspiciously, grudgingly, as if it were a half-penny when it ought to have been a pound and put it away in her purse, must put up with it, mean and miserly though it was, times being hard, so very hard; and on she went, creaking, injured Mrs. Holman, about the girl with the swollen joints.

So the main character sees Mrs. Holman's action. Entirely different, unrecognizably different, would be the report of any other person in the story. Shut inside the one mind, the writer observes the world Lady-of-Shalott fashion, no event visible to him at all until it is reflected, for good or evil, in the mirror of one character's consciousness.

Another point of peculiarity in the stream-of-consciousness story is that the author's examination of his character is always microscopic, with both the advantages and the defects of microscopy. The examination shows only a little, one mood, one trait, but it shows that little enormously magnified, every particle of it made visible. What happens to the individual in relation to his external circumstances is pushed far into the background. What happens to his mood is given prime consideration. Of all means for reducing the value of events within narrative and exalting the value of feeling, this treatment of events as mood-causers and nothing else is the most effective.

Thus far in its brief but important course, the stream-of-consciousness story has been most frequently used for the presentation of trivial or selfish moods or for the recording of portraits of neurotics. The heroic emotions do not readily lend themselves to this treatment, perhaps because any character, examined microscopically, appears neurotic, perhaps because strength of character expresses itself in controlling events instead of merely in sensing events.

Omniscient observation of character.—Single character location and location in the stream of consciousness both allow the writer full access to his hero's conscious mind, but neither allows him any other privilege. Contrast the two passages given below, the one from *The New Dress*, the other, the opening paragraphs in Ben Ames Williams' *One Crowded Hour*.

Mabel had her first serious suspicion that something was wrong, as she took her cloak off and Mrs. Barnet, while handing her the mirror and touching the brushes and thus drawing her attention, perhaps rather markedly, to all the appliances for tidying and improving hair, complexion, clothes, which existed on the dressing table, confirmed the suspicion,—that it was not right, not quite right, which growing stronger as she went upstairs and springing at her with conviction as she greeted Clarissa Dalloway, she went straight to the far end of the room, to a shaded corner where a looking-glass hung and looked. No! It was not *right*. And at once the misery which she always tried to hide, the profound dissatisfaction,—the sense she had had, ever since she was a child, of being inferior to other people —set upon her, relentlessly, remorselessly, with an intensity which she could not beat off, as she would when she woke at night at home, by reading Borrow or Scott; for oh these men, oh these women, all were thinking—"What's Mabel wearing? What a fright she looks! What a hideous new dress!"—their

eyelids flickering as they came up and then their lids shutting rather tight.

He was, at the period of which I write, a man fifty-seven years old, and his life had been as completely uneventful as life can be. He had never had an adventure, had never suffered a catastrophe, had never achieved any great thing, had never been called upon to endure a particularly poignant grief. He was born in the house where he still lived and save for one trip to Portland had never crossed the county line. He married the daughter of a man whose farm lay on the other side of Fraternity. She was not particularly pretty at any time; and he had never had any passion for her though he had always liked her well enough and had always been kind. His father and mother lived till he was in his forties, then died peaceably in their beds. He had been a child of their later years, and before they died they had become almost completely helpless, so that he felt it was time for them to go.

In this second excerpt the author obviously knows about his hero not only what, favorably placed, he might see and hear or what he might discover from entrance into that hero's thought. He knows also all that lies in the hero's subconsciousness, things about which only a personal God could have knowledge and which none but an unscrupulous personal God would divulge. In such a story as the one just quoted, the creator of the character allows himself all the perquisites of his creation. He explains what his character says and does and why that character decides to say and do it; he explains as well the secret and contradictory springs of action, the inhibitions and the unrecognized passions directing the character's decisions. "He had never had an adventure . . . had never been called upon to endure a particularly poignant grief." It is not so that Eben looks at his own life, it is not so that any of Eben's neighbors are privileged to look at it. This

is the view of God, unhindered by barriers of time or flesh.

Weighted omniscience.—From objective treatment to omniscience on the writer's part would seem to cover the whole range of points of view possible to third-person treatment. There is, however, one variety of omniscience which requires still a word of special comment. In the opening of *One Crowded Hour* the author is, so far as the reader sees, merely telling of his hero. The reader may seemingly think of that hero what he pleases, though actually, of course, what he is to think is carefully directed. In *Rain*, on the other hand, the missionary's wife is introduced thus:

> The most remarkable thing about her was her voice, high, metallic, and without inflection; it fell on the ear with a hard monotony, irritating to the nerves like the pitiless clamour of a pneumatic drill. . . . Her sense of delicacy was singular. Early in their acquaintance she had said to him, "You know their marriage customs when we first settled in the islands were so shocking I couldn't possibly describe them to you. But I'll tell Mrs. Macphail and she'll tell you."

Here the author takes direct charge of the reader's sympathies. No reader can be in doubt either of what the creator of the character feels towards it or of what he intends his followers to feel. (The omniscience exercised is an omniscience heavily weighted against the character.)

Application of the third-person treatments.—We have, then, in the third person four notably different possibilities in the treatment of point of view. From one to the other, the writer steadily widens the field. With the first, he sees and hears merely, though from a situation particularly favored. With the second, he sees and hears through the eyes and ears of one of his characters and also thinks and feels with that character. With the third, one mood of

his character is magnified before him; he sees nothing else, but he sees that completely. The fourth allows for all seeing, all hearing, all entrance into the character's mind, all knowledge of the character's past and present and his unformulated impulses, and, along with this, the human privilege of loving or hating the story's persons. Considering these four points of view with the examples which illustrate them, what conclusions can a writer draw to apply to his own work? Having in mind some particular piece of story material, how far, if it is to be a third-person story at all, can he decide what form of third-person telling will best give it its chance?

The answer to that question is another question: what is his purpose in the handling of his materials? Is it his purpose to center interest chiefly on the external events of his story? Is it his purpose to display character by means of important action? Or to interpret it by means of trivial action rendered significant by the character's response? Or to direct sympathy by means of author's interpretation of the scene and character he has introduced? In *The New Dress*, the mind, the inner thought, of the character fills the page. In *The Mob from Massac* what we are shown of the Judge is mainly what he says and what he does—his outside. And yet it would be a reader of some temerity who would assert that we know the one character better than we know the other. The difference—this cannot be emphasized too strongly—the difference between different points of view is not usually a difference in amount of knowledge of character which is finally conveyed; in this respect, one point of view has no intrinsic advantage over another. It is only that one better than another fits the need of a particular kind of material or a particular writer's way of looking at life.

Uses of objective treatment.—As already shown, objective treatment is likely to be useful in stories involving a puzzle. As already shown, too, its blunt, unqualified assertion is effective in stories where, because the story runs counter to some established belief in the reader's mind, an extra effort is needed to secure credulity. Here its use is identical in effect with the orator's trick of slipping an "of course" into a doubtful statement. In either of these cases, the alternative of using the objective point of view would probably be location of the teller in the mind of some minor character, eyewitness to the events described, who is puzzled or convinced or horrified by them as the reader is meant to be. Whether, for one especial piece of material, observation through the eyes of a minor character is better or worse than objective treatment depends upon the kind and amount of emotional effect the writer wants. The presence of a witness and interpreter within the story makes for exciting emotion along the way in answer to the emotion the witness feels; objective treatment makes for holding it in check and piles it up for the end. Objective treatment, therefore, renders palatable material that is stronger and crasser than that which can be rendered palatable by means of reflection through the eyes of one of the persons in the story. This is true both because the reader does not get the reaction of the character's feeling, and because the finality of the telling, the sense of its being so, makes a reader accept it as he accepts the inevitable. For a writer uncertain of his medium, there are few exercises more enlightening than that of trying the opening scene and the crucial scene of his story in two ways—once objectively, once with access to the mind of one of the partakers in the scene. And the exercise will be more helpful if he remember, in trying it,

that habitually inexperienced writers overstress the emotions shown in their stories, especially the painful emotions, holding too little in reserve, too obviously assaulting their readers.

Use of location in the mind of the main character.—To justify location in the mind of the main character, four conditions are essential. The main character must be an interesting one; he must be the center of events, or he ceases to be the main character; he must be puzzled by events along the way, even though he finally elucidate them; and he must either change under the pressure of events or must remain spectacularly stationary where change would be expected.

These are tests difficult to apply. It is useful, as a prelude to applying them to one's own material, to apply them specifically and one at a time to the hero of some other story—to Nunez, perhaps, in *The Country of the Blind.* What is it which makes Nunez interesting? Does any important thing happen in the story except in connection with Nunez? What part of our knowledge of the puzzle formed by events can we gain only from Nunez's mind? Do events alter him? Or does he keep spectacularly to his own place?

One of the frequent difficulties of the inexperienced writer is the wooden hero. Events shape themselves to the story's need, minor characters come alive, but the hero remains unconvincing. Such a hero, tried in this fashion, is frequently found to be not the hero at all, but only a lay figure representing the author—a figure around whom, instead of through whom, the action takes place.

Use of the stream-of-consciousness method.—But what if the story, while still that of one main character, is to be not a stream of events played upon by the main character's

consciousness, but a stream of consciousness shadowed by events? What material can be made to conform to this alluring point of view and what material resists it?

Since it is an alluring point of view, it is perhaps wise to consider first the difficulties it entails. Material where external happenings are meant to show an importance of their own, to reveal anything, to affect anything, would, obviously, be ruled out. To try to tell *The Fourth Man* by means of presentation of a stream of consciousness would be absurd. Quite as obviously, a story which strives to present a rounded character rather than one trait in character or one mood must usually choose another point of view, partly for reasons of space; the mingled ridiculousness and lovability of Judge Priest could scarcely be presented except by showing things outside himself for contrast with him. A character meant to be admired is also difficult of presentation by this means, this especial point of view being an apter instrument for the exciting of scorn or pity than of admiration.

Emphasis may well be laid upon the kinds of material unsuited to stream-of-consciousness presentation, for in the present decade no one reads long in the field of fiction without realizing that for beginners Katherine Mansfield is an influence almost as potent now as O. Henry was in the early nineteen hundreds. Scores of stream-of-consciousness stories come from the pens of people who have never fairly explored their own minds and whose real interest is in events. A temperament which sees life as mood coloring event rather than as event affecting mood will, of course—and should, of course—express life as it sees it. It is as profitable, however, for the present-day beginner to examine curiously the origin of his impulse to write stream-of-consciousness stories as it would have been for

the beginner of fifteen years ago to question why "story" for him had come to mean "surprise-ending story" and whether really, at heart, he believed life to express itself oftenest in a series of suddenly disclosed tricks.

At the end of this digression with its "don'ts" implied and stated, what is left for treatment from the point of view of the character's stream of consciousness? It is the vehicle, and peculiarly the vehicle, for expressing the minor emotions. Nearly always the story so told must be a story limited in time to a few hours, often to a few minutes. Always it is limited to presentation of the inhibited human being. For such a being, and for the exposition of one mood chosen from among those moods set to a minor key, no medium exists which compares with it. And the beginner attempting such an exposition may garner one satisfaction in advance—either his story will be admirable, breath-takingly so, or it will be only a clutter of words. There are no halfway good stream-of-consciousness stories, any more than there are halfway good soap-bubbles.

Use of omniscience.—The assumption of omniscience on the writer's part offers in one respect, though only in one, the same difficulty that exists with entrance into the stream of consciousness. It is a point of view which, followed consistently, requires that the story limit itself to very small scope. As a matter of practice, omniscience, whether weighted or otherwise, is rarely used through the length of a story. It is valuable for summary and for the presenting of advance information. It is likely to be handicapping after the action of the story is under way.

Shifts in point of view.—Another question arises in practice, to which an answer should at least be attempted. In general, what about shifts of point of view within a

story? Is it advisable to pass from location in one mind to location in another? Is it advisable to pass from one kind of treatment to another?

Obviously, weighted omniscience cannot change to location in the mind of a character favorable to that one against whom the omniscience was weighted; obviously, too, a stream-of-consciousness story cannot turn to a point of view which subordinates mood to event. Apart from these attempts to add apples and pears, the question of shifts of point of view is chiefly a question of economy. Ordinarily, such a shift costs something in extra words used and costs still more in the demand it makes upon the reader to readjust his mind. The writer looking over his story and finding the point of view several times shifted has need to consider both of those costs. If the shifts are meant to produce contrast, to balance one personality against another, they may well be worth while, though even then there is danger of their giving an effect of scrappiness. If they are only means for getting information to the reader, then they are almost certainly a source of weakness. In the following excerpts from a student's story, for example, it is quite evident that the movement from mind to mind is not the result of a desire on the writer's part to display two minds, one in contrast to the other, but only of uncertainty about how to get the narrative under way.

Sir Henry hummed softly and blithely as he shaved. He was happy today, for his wife was to spend a week in the country. He would be glad to have a short respite from her incessant nagging. . . . It had been this nagging and lack of understanding, in fact, that had made Helen come to be so attractive. It was not a clandestine love affair, or anything like that, of course, but he realized that his wife would never have understood; he had never told her of their intimacy.

It was a shame that a man could not be appreciated at home. It seemed mean and sordid to have to meet Helen and take her to places where they wouldn't meet any of their friends. Then he had to return and make excuses to his wife. Now, however, he'd be free for a week. It would be pleasant to have Helen to dinner here at the apartment; he'd telephone her when he went out. He put away the dark suit that he had worn the day before, and got out his light spring suit. He selected a tie rather more carefully than was his habit. As he stood before the mirror, carefully knotting it, there entered a very intelligent-looking young man.

"Hello, Austin." Austin was a fine chap. Not only was he the best laboratory assistant that Sir Henry had ever had, but he had gotten him out of some very tight places. For instance that time when his wife had asked him who was at the club dinner. . . .

"I beg your pardon, sir, I thought you would be ready to begin work." *Then he noticed that Sir Henry had taken longer than usual to dress this morning, but he refrained from smiling. That was another of his accomplishments, he knew when not to smile.*

"That's all right, Austin. I am going down to Hurdon and Baker's this morning to see how that precipitation apparatus is working. . . . Oh, and that damned American spiritualist is coming again to see if I will have a séance. I can't see why, just because I was once fool enough to write an article on spiritualism for the *Review*, I should be pestered for the rest of my life. We shall have to get rid of her."

Sir Henry ate an ample breakfast. By remarkable self-restraint, he was able to maintain an air of sober solicitude at the breakfast table. He promised to take good care of himself, and managed to conceal his pleasure at kissing his wife good-bye. He set out cheerfully for Hurdon and Baker's plant. On the way he bought a gardenia for his buttonhole, and telephoned Helen from the florist's. Yes, she would *love* to come. He swung his stick jauntily the rest of the way.

That afternoon time began to drag. He grew restless. He wondered when Helen would come. . . . At last, the door-bell rang.

"If it is the spiritualist, show her in here. If it is Helen, show her into the drawing-room."

He adjusted his necktie and walked through the portières into the drawing-room. As he did so, Helen entered the door from the hall. She was a stunning young woman. Her blonde hair was partially confined by a white bandeau, and she wore a white wrap and frock. He gazed at her with obvious admiration.

"You look very well tonight, dearest."

"Do you think so?"

"You always look well in white. I like this costume—it gives you an ethereal look. Sets off the delicacy of your features and makes you seem almost incorporeal." The bell rang again, and they heard Austin ushering the medium into the laboratory. They glanced at the thick portières. They were tightly closed, and Sir Henry took Helen in his arms.

But they did *not* hear the door open a second time. They were too deeply interested in each other to have heard an explosion in the laboratory, had there been one. But the door *had* opened again, *and as Austin emerged from the laboratory into the hall, he was horrified to see Lady Anne going through the door into the drawing-room. He rushed in at her heels, thinking faster than he had ever thought before. Here was a real problem for his genius as a diplomat.*

Austin stopped behind Lady Anne, frantically attracting Sir Henry's attention to a notebook. . . .

No gain in ease for the writer can possibly compensate for the dislocation of reader's interest which the two shifts, and especially the latter one, cause. When a writer discovers himself slipping from one point of view to another, he is likely to find, on self-examination, that his decision about what story he wants to write is equally unsteady. To try the material in hand all from one point of view, then all from another, is a laborious course, but it is the surest which can be advised for making the worker at home with his material.

SUGGESTIONS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION.

(1) a. From what point of view is *The Killers* written?

b. Is there a shift in point of view at the place where Nick goes to warn Andreson?

c. What is the emotional effect of the point of view used?

d. Is this effect one of those discussed in the text or is it a new one?

e. Could the story be told from any other point of view?

f. What determines your answer to *e?*

(2) a. From what point of view is *Sir Watson Tyler* written?

b. What would be lost and what gained by adopting for *Sir Watson Tyler* the point of view used in *The Leech?*

(3) "Most stories can be told, and told successfully, from any one of two or three angles."

Suggest, from your own reading, a third-person story for which only one point of view is possible.

(4) "Objective treatment . . . does more than conceal plot."

a. What are the other things it does?

b. Does the statement in the text cover all of the uses of objective treatment?

c. If not, what additions should be made to it?

(5) ". . . in the stream-of-consciousness story . . . the author's examination of his character is always microscopic, with both the advantages and the defects of microscopy."

a. What are the more obvious of these advantages?

b. What are the defects?

(6) What is meant by the phrase "weighted omniscience"?

(7) What conditions must the main character fulfil to render successful the telling of the story from his point of view?

SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITTEN EXERCISES

(1) "Location in the mind of a character called "I" . . . limits the character to an onlooker or offers him instead the position of buffoon or dupe."

Explain, with illustration, at least one case in which this statement does not hold true.

(2) "A character meant to be admired is difficult of presentation by this means (by means of author's observation of the stream of consciousness), this especial point of view being an apter instrument for the exciting of scorn or pity than of admiration."

Write one episode of a stream-of-consciousness story in which the character displayed is a character exciting admiration.

(3) Rewrite the opening paragraphs of *The Leech* (as far as "'Do you know,' she broke out——"), substituting "I" for "she" and making such other alterations as this change requires.

(4) Choosing an important passage of two or three hundred words from one of your own stories, rewrite it from a new point of view.

The First-Person Story

Suggested Reading: *The Curate's Friend*
"Arab Stuff"

The main character.—So far, we have dealt with third-person stories. What stories lend themselves to first-person treatment?

As has been noted already, an "I" who is also a main character is a difficult figure to manage except when he is to be made objectionable. In a student story a year or two ago there occurred the sentence, "I faced the new danger with unshaken courage." The phrase illuminates a whole field barred to first-person telling. With rare exceptions, the author cannot, in good faith, allow the hero to attribute to himself any of the major virtues. If he claim them, he must claim them either with his tongue in his cheek or with a blatancy which denies the claim at the moment of its making.

And just as a character used as "I" may not ordinarily take to itself the virtues, so it may not make mention of its own effectiveness with other characters in the story.

"I greeted him with coquettish grace" needs no extended comment.

If, then, the main character is meant to impress the reader as alluring, as spiritually valiant, as intellectually profound, if he is to be admired, it is all but impossible to let him tell his own story.

On the other hand, objectionable vagaries, whether of temper or of intellect, often require first-person treatment because no other person is possessed of the information on which the story is based, and because the writer may thus inject sympathy into a situation which, told from the outside, lends itself only to ridicule or to condemnation. *The Tell-Tale Heart*—"True, nervous, very, very dreadfully nervous, I have been and am"—is a case in point. So is Mansfield's intricate and appalling story, *Je ne parle pas français*. The hero's self-scorn, which is its very point, could hardly be conveyed by any other medium.

The Pit and the Pendulum is told by its one actor in his own person but here for a quite different reason. In this story the main actor is not actually an individual at all; he is merely any human being. He attributes to himself no characteristics except the one universal characteristic of a dread of torture and death. In his struggle to escape he is as much a generalized figure as "Everyman" in the old Morality. He gains therefore a certain authenticity and a lack of circumlocution by his "I" with no attendant loss. Stories of struggle against danger where the opposing forces are so ill matched as to reduce the man concerned merely to Man are often successfully told in the person of the struggler.

The minor character.—Where the "I" is not a main but a minor character, he is a far more usable figure. Barring one-man stories, such as *The Pit and the Pendulum*,

and stories dependent on a special secret twist in the teller's mind, there is no form of material with which this point of view has not been successfully used. Its difficulties, easily seen and therefore easily measured, are those of time, place, and cause—how it came about that important happenings took place within the minor character's sight and hearing; why he was made the main character's confidant, and so following. These difficulties, by the way, are almost identical, whether the minor character in whose mind the author locates himself be called "I" or "he."

There are so many minor-character, first-person tellings, and so many of the many use their chosen point of view for the production of a special effect, that they are perhaps best discussed by groups.

Least important of the groups is the one containing that "I" who merely records the course of the story without altering it and without affecting the reader's relation to it except in so far as his presence adds informality to the telling or increases the sense of veracity. The "I" who walks in and out of Kipling's *Plain Tales* is an example. "I have said that the Senior Subaltern was in love. . . . I do not wish to reflect on the morality of the Shikarris." So is the "I" who appears in the early part of *The Country of the Blind*. For this "I," the most that can be said is that, if the reader does not come to feel it an annoying affectation, it does no harm and may do good in the two directions noted above.

Apart from this colorless "I," there is the "I" who enters the story as representative of the reader. Such a character is one of the most familiar of the literary tools. He is all but invariable in the detective story, present more

often than not in the ghost story. In both, the "I" feels what the reader would have felt had he stood within the sweep of the events in the story, wonders where the reader would have wondered, admires or fears the hero as the reader would have done. In all these ways he is useful, but above all he is useful as inquirer for, and receiver of, needed information. For this last use Dr. Watson is, of course, the inevitable example.

"My room at the Cedars is a double-bedded one," Holmes announces.

"The Cedars?" asks Watson.

"Yes, that is Mr. St. Clair's house. I am staying there while I conduct the inquiry."

"Where is it, then?"

"Near Lee, in Kent."

"You forget that I know nothing of the case."

"I shall just have time to tell you the facts. . . ."

And the facts the reader requires for an understanding of the detective work to follow come forth, close-packed.

The "I" is again representing the reader, though in a different way, in stories where he is used chiefly to receive and record the shock caused by the action—in such stories, for example, as *The Man Who Would Be King*.

In either of the two sets of instances, the teller provides no new attitude in the story, only enhances the attitude of mind already produced in the reader by the events. His presence aids elucidation or sharpens feeling; it does not alter feeling.

There are stories, however, where the minor character "I" does far more. In *By the Rod of His Wrath*, by William Allen White, the "I" is not only himself and in a measure the reader, he is also the community, the whole

outraged little Middle Western town, watching and abhorring the downward course of its chief citizen. The "I" changes the quality of the denunciation from private to general judgment.

In Galsworthy's *The Man Who Kept His Form*, the "I" has a still more striking use. Here the events of the story take their course, the "I" acting chiefly as recorder. The hero pursues his hard way, "keeps his form" through loss of fortune, through his wife's desertion, through long war service, till at last, dropped from his earlier estate, old and ill, he sits in the rain on the seat of his seldom-hired hansom cab. The teller looks back and sees him there—and knows suddenly what his career has typified.

> "He had resumed his driver's seat, and, through the rain, I saw him with the cigarette between his lips, and the lamplight shining on his lean profile. Very still he sat—symbol of that lost cause, gentility."

It is a conclusion which unifies the narrative, gives it significance and general application, a conclusion to which the reader, unaided, would travel haltingly if at all. Here the "I" has taken no striking part in the action, less even than Dr. Watson takes ordinarily in the adventures of his hero, but his presence has altered the meaning of the story none the less. He has been not only representative of the reader but special interpreter to him as well.

The "I" who tells a story from a particular and limited viewpoint—that of a child, that of an old servant—is also interpreter and often is emphasizer by reason of false interpretation.

Two important groups of stories told in the first person by a minor character have been left to the last. One of

these is the story wherein the teller, along with his other uses, serves also as foil to the hero, setting off his qualities either by duplication or by contrast, and taking in the action a part just subordinate. Such a story is *The Secret Sharer*. The "I," contrasting his own nervous tension with the stern control of Leggatt, doubles the reader's appreciation of that control. And when the story is finished, it would be hard to say whether the man concealed or the man who makes concealment possible stands first in the reader's interest.

The other first-person story thus far left without discussion is the reminiscent one. All first-person telling is in a measure reminiscent, but in the story definitely reminiscent—such a story as *Youth*—the teller, though telling of himself, is yet not telling his own story. The person he has once been he has ceased from being before the time of the narrative. Looking back, the "I" interprets that earlier person in the light of his later understanding.

". . . and we turned, we turned incessantly, with the water to our waists, to our necks, over our heads. It was all one. We had forgotten how it felt to be dry.

"And there was somewhere in me the thought: By Jove! this is the deuce of an adventure—something you read about; and it is my first voyage as second mate—and I am only twenty—and here I am lasting it out as well as any of these men, and keeping my chaps up to the mark. I was pleased. I would not have given up the experience for worlds. I had moments of exultation. Whenever the old dismantled craft pitched heavily with her counter high in the air, she seemed to me to throw up, like an appeal, like a defiance, like a cry to the clouds without mercy, the words written on her stern: 'Judea, London. Do or Die.'

"O youth! The strength of it, the faith of it, the imagination of it! To me she was not an old rattle-trap carting about the

world a lot of coal for a freight—to me she was the endeavor, the test, the trial of life. I think of her with pleasure, with affection, with regret—as you would think of someone dead you have loved. I shall never forget her. . . ."

And now, with all these different kinds of "I," main or minor, what of their usefulness to the beginner at writing? Stories told in the first person have shown of late years a marked increase in number. "I" has been the favorite medium of several of the important contemporary short-story writers, and their influence has been potent. For the inexperienced writer, however, first-person telling, except where the story is definitely reminiscent, is set about by two or three special difficulties. Especially it is difficult if the material the writer is dealing with is taken from his own experience rather than from his observation of other people's experience.

For almost any beginner at fiction, the most alluring narrative of all is that one in which he has himself taken a not-to-be-despised part. In the last decade, ten thousand war stories, probably many more, have come to wreck upon the writer's determination to show himself, in the first person, playing with credit a rôle which he played, unquestionably with credit, in actual fact. It may fairly be said that in nine cases out of ten the writer, trying to tell a true or nearly true story of his own adventures, should keep himself out of it, using third person and thereby steering away from the all but inevitable tendency to self-justification or self-praise. The tenth case—and it is a doubtful one—is where the teller, retailing his own experience, is merely Man in a shell hole or Man beneath the descent of the avalanche.

To place a story in the third person instead of the first is, however, a precaution wasted if its maker, instead of

identifying himself with his character, continues to identify his character with himself. A first requirement is for the writer to get himself out of his story before he begins to put himself in again in connection with one or more of his characters. It is because this getting one's self out of situations in which one actually took important part is so difficult a task that the words "This is a true story" at the head of a manuscript have come to be a warning, not an invitation.

"I" telling of actual happenings whereof he was an observer and yet not a partaker is more easily managed, but even here there is a price to pay, the price of over-interest in the observer's own feelings and judgments. In general, it is safer for the beginner to select a quite different person, one possessing definite personal characteristics of his own, to use as teller.

Where the material in use is not the writer's own—is not, that is, taken from any part of life that he has had a chance to influence—then the minor character "I" provides a flexible and often valuable point of view. The chances of digression and of mawkishness, however, are undoubtedly increased by giving an "I" a chance with a story. Mrs. Fisher finds a definite reason, connected with plot and resulting in economy of words, for her use of first person in *Flint and Fire*. Unless the story has been born a first-person story—has so placed itself without planning—the inexperienced writer should also have a definite reason before he gives over the telling of his story to "I."

In deciding whether or not so to give it over, a helpful exercise is for the writer to picture himself listening to the story, it coming from the lips of an acquaintance. Would the emotion aroused, time and place being al-

lowed for, be what he wants his audience to have? Does the "I" add anything except a set of easy transitions from one time point to another? If it does not, how much danger is there of its costing more, in limitations of place and time and opportunity for observation, than it is worth?

The box.—A point of view closely related to the first-person tellings already discussed is that of the boxed story, the story told inside a box of disconnected narrative, which, though unrelated to the happenings of the story, yet gives it its setting and determines its tone.

"It was our first night in camp—a camp in the heart of California redwoods. We had been hilarious on our way in that afternoon. We had been mirthful at sunset, and mildly cheerful through the coming of dusk, but now, with night around us, laughter halted. Momentarily we drew closer to our spark of camp-fire, as ineffectual as a glow worm in the Catacombs, and oftener and oftener our eyes traveled unwillingly up from its small consolation to the looming black tree shapes overhead and the funnel of sky that showed between them.

"'Looks like the shaft of a mine,' Drury commented under his breath, lying back on the redwood needles and giving himself up to contemplation. 'Looks like a tunnel tipped up on end. You know, I was in an up-ended tunnel once. . . .'"

And the story is on, a story entirely intelligible by itself, having nothing to do with redwoods, nothing to do with camping, but echoing, if it is to be a successful one, the mood in which it has been inaugurated.

The boxed treatment is perhaps the most difficult, and is certainly one of the most delightful, that can be used in the conscious shaping of story material. Notable examples of its use are plentiful. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is a story so told, *Youth* is another, Kipling's *Bertran*

and Bimi is another, Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* a fourth. In each of these the main story is complete without the box, would be still a forceful story if no box existed. What, then, is the purpose of setting it inside a framework of narrative irrelevant to its incidents? What shadow does the box cast on the material it encloses?

Perhaps *Bertran and Bimi* is the easiest example, as it is the briefest, from which to attempt an answer. The essential incidents of the story are these: A man living on a remote island near New Guinea makes a pet and housemate of an orang-outang. After some years of close association with the animal, the man marries. The orang-outang, though jealous of the wife, bides his time, pretending to be friendly to her. When the husband, lulled to security, leaves the house to go to a neighbor's, the orang-outang attacks the wife, digs through the thatch of the room to which she flees for protection, and tears her to fragments. The husband, returning, lures the exultant beast back, and kills and is killed by it in bare-handed struggle.

Here we have a set of happenings of crass hideousness. How is that hideousness to be so modified or covered as to be made pleasing instead of crass? One answer, of course, is that for some readers it need not be modified. The more blunted the reader's emotions, whether through lack of experience or inborn obtuseness, the more raw meat he will accept in his ration of reading and the less he demands for that meat any excuse other than its rawness. The minor poet shown in *Bliss* rhapsodizing over the beauties of a bit of recent verse, ". . . a *dreadful* poem about a *girl* who was violated by a beggar without a *nose* in a little *wood*," is Katherine Mansfield's satire on a tendency in ephemeral writing quite as noticeable in

contemporary short stories as in contemporary verse. But except for a group of readers strictly limited, orang-outang and man clawing each other to death are interesting only if they can be made significant of something more than their individual struggle. To make the contest significant, the emotions excited by the story must not be so painful as to distract the reader's attention from the general significance. In *Bertran and Bimi*, the box is one means, and the chief one, used for accomplishing this purpose. The two parts of the box, that which introduces the story and that which concludes it, follow.[1]

The orang-outang in the big iron cage lashed to the sheep-pen began the discussion. The night was stiflingly hot, and as I and Hans Breitmann, the big-beamed German, passed him, dragging our bedding to the forepeak of the steamer, he roused himself and chattered obscenely. He had been caught somewhere in the Malayan Archipelago, and was going to England to be exhibited at a shilling a head. For four days he had struggled, yelled, and wrenched at the heavy bars of his prison without ceasing, and had nearly slain a Lascar, incautious enough to come within reach of the great hairy paw.

"It would be well for you, mine friend, if you was a liddle seasick," said Hans Breitmann, pausing by the cage. "You haf too much Ego in your Cosmos."

The orang-outang's arm slid out negligently from between the bars. No one would have believed that it would make a sudden snakelike rush at the German's breast. The thin silk of the sleeping-suit tore out; Hans stepped back unconcernedly to pluck a banana from a bunch hanging close to one of the boats.

"Too much Ego," said he, peeling the fruit and offering it to the caged devil, who was rending the silk to tatters.

Then we laid out our bedding in the bows among the sleeping Lascars, to catch any breeze that the pace of the ship might give us. The sea was like smoky oil, except where it turned to fire under our forefoot and whirled back into the dark in smears

[1]Reprinted from *Life's Handicap* by permission of the author.

of dull flame. There was a thunderstorm some miles away; we could see the glimmer of the lightning. The ship's cow, distressed by the heat and the smell of the ape-beast in the cage, lowed unhappily from time to time in exactly the same key as that in which the look-out man answered the hourly call from the bridge. The trampling tune of the engines was very distinct, and the jarring of the ash-lift, as it was tipped into the sea, hurt the procession of hushed noise. Hans lay down by my side and lighted a good-night cigar. This was naturally the beginning of conversation. He owned a voice as soothing as the wash of the sea, and stores of experience as vast as the sea itself; for his business in life was to wander up and down the world, collecting orchids and wild beasts and ethnological specimens for German and American dealers. I watched the glowing end of his cigar wax and wane in the gloom, as the sentences rose and fell, till I was nearly asleep. The orang-outang, troubled by some dream of the forests of his freedom, began to yell like a soul in purgatory, and to pluck madly at the bars of the cage.

"If he was out now dere would not be much of us left hereabout," said Hans lazily. "He screams goot. See, now, how I shall tame him when he stops himself."

There was a pause in the outcry, and from Hans' mouth came an imitation of a snake's hiss, so perfect that I almost sprang to my feet. The sustained murderous sound ran along the deck, and the wrenching at the bars ceased. The orang-outang was quaking in an ecstasy of pure terror.

"Dot stopped him," said Hans. "I learned dot trick in Mogoung Tanjong when I was collecting liddle monkeys for some peoples in Berlin. Efery one in der world is afraid of der monkeys—except der snake. So I blay snake against monkey, and he keep quite still. Dere was too much Ego in his Cosmos. Dot is der soul-custom of monkeys. Are you asleep, or will you listen, and I will tell a dale dot you shall not pelief?"

"There's no tale in the wide world that I can't believe," I said.

"If you haf learned pelief you haf learned somedings. Now I shall try your pelief. Goot! When I was collecting dose liddle monkeys—it was in '79 or '80, und I was in der islands of der Archipelago—over dere in der dark." . . .

* * * * * * * * * * *

The infernal clamour in the cage recommenced. "Aha! Dot friend of ours haf still too much Ego in his Cosmos. Be quiet, dou!"

Hans hissed long and venomously. We could hear the great beast quaking in his cage.

"But why in the world didn't you help Bertran instead of letting him be killed?" I asked.

"My friend," said Hans, composedly stretching himself to slumber, "it was not nice even to mineself dot I should live after I haf seen dot room mit der hole in der thatch. Und Bertran, he was her husband. Goot-night, und—sleep well."

So far as happenings go, these two pieces of explanation and description, set one on either side of the main story, do not alter that story. It is exactly the same story in substance when they are removed, but it is a story very different in effect upon the reader.

Ordinarily, the thing which most sharpens pathos or tragedy in fiction is likeness to the reader's own life. After that come firsthand expression of emotion by the figures in the story, whether main or subsidiary, and a sense of the nearness of persons and happenings concerned, a sense usually promoted by easy visualization of scene. Each of these enhancements, the box surrounding *Bertran and Bimi* carefully removes. The teller makes it clear that the thing he is telling happened years before, in a part of the world and under conditions strange to the point of being bizarre. Through his method of telling, his oddities of diction and pronunciation, he puts himself into the foreground before the actual story is begun at all, leaving wife and husband as shadowy figures, heard of, not seen. Twice, that is, he drops a veil between his listener and the story listened to, a veil of strange and unvisualized surroundings, a veil of subordination of figures actually concerned. And added to these is the

veil of the teller's own philosophic composure, his invocation of unbelief instead of belief—"I will tell a dale dot you shall not pelief,"—his prearrangement of that story to illustrate a principle instead of centering it on an individual dilemma. For a beginner at writing it is worth while to read *Bertran and Bimi* and afterwards another Kipling story, *Without Benefit of Clergy*, in close succession and more than once, considering the difference in the reader's feeling made by the second hero's being shown at first hand instead of through the eyes of a teller, his emotion exhibited directly instead of with another character interposed as recorder of it.

One use of the box, then, is for the moderating of horror, the conveying of the "once upon a time" effect which takes the brutality out of killing, the heartbreak out of loss. Another use is for the clarifying of theme. Always, in any box worth the space it takes, the effect of the box is to emphasize the general truth of which the story told is a specific instance. *Bertran and Bimi* could be used in illustration of this point also, but an illustration still more striking is found in *Heart of Darkness*. The box in this second instance is too long to be quoted in its entirety, is probably too familiar to students of the short story to require quoting, but one fraction of its early part may well be emphasized.[1] Marlowe, who is to tell the story, and his group of friends are sitting on the deck of a yacht anchored in the Thames. The time is sunset.

> . . . dusk fell on the stream and lights began to appear along the shore. The Chapman lighthouse, a three-legged thing erect on a mud-flat, shone strongly. Lights of ships moved in the fairway—a great stir of lights going up and going down.

[1]Reprinted from *Youth* (*And Two Other Stories*) by permission of James B. Pinker and Son, Inc.

And farther west on the upper reaches the place of the monstrous town was still marked ominously on the sky, a brooding gloom in sunshine, a lurid glare under the stars.

"And this also," said Marlowe suddenly, "has been one of the dark places of the earth." . . .

His remark did not seem at all surprising. It was just like Marlowe. It was accepted in silence. No one took the trouble to grunt even; and presently he said, very slow—

"I was thinking of very old times, when the Romans first came here, nineteen hundred years ago—the other day. . . . Light came out of this river since—you say Knights? Yes; but it is like a running blaze on a plain, like a flash of lightning in the clouds. We live in the flicker—may it last as long as the old earth keeps rolling! But darkness was here yesterday. Imagine the feelings of a commander of a fine—what d'ye call 'em?—trireme in the Mediterranean, ordered suddenly to the north; run overland across the Gauls in a hurry; put in charge of one of these craft the legionaries,—a wonderful lot of handy men they must have been too—used to build, apparently by the hundred, in a month or two, if we may believe what we read. Imagine him here—the very end of the world, a sea the color of lead, a sky the color of smoke, a kind of ship about as rigid as a concertina—and going up this river with stores, or orders, or what you like. Sandbanks, marshes, forests, savages. . . . Land in a swamp, march through the woods and in some inland post feel the savagery, the utter savagery, had closed round him, —all that mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men. There's no initiation either into such mysteries. He has to live n the midst of the incomprehensible, which is also detestable. And it has a fascination, too, that goes to work upon him. The fascination of the abomination—you know. Imagine the growing regrets, the longing to escape, the powerless disgust, the surrender, the hate."

Here we have paragraphs which perform a service quite other than that of speedily orienting the reader or of modifying emotion. They emphasize theme and by

emphasizing it give to the story *Heart of Darkness* tells —the story of Kurtz in Africa—a universality which makes it the story of all savagery momentarily conquering, through all centuries, the outposts of the civilization that is at last to conquer it.

What, then, are the opportunities which use of the box offers to the beginner? Its first and simplest use is for economy in introductory words. Time and place and mood of story, useful peculiarities of teller, may be given without circumlocution. Beyond this, it offers means for the modification of horror or grief, giving distance and therefore softening to material not otherwise acceptable. It offers, too, opportunity for exhibiting the general truth hidden behind an individual instance.

These are important gains. The losses are closely related to them—loss of the vividness which springs from first-hand presentation, loss of suspense about the outcome of the story so far as that outcome affects the teller, loss of concentration of attention on the individual instance. To profit by such a setting, there is needed either material vivid and powerful enough to show its outlines clearly through several veils, or material important chiefly for its philosophic content.

Aside from the losses named, each under certain circumstances a gain, there is, however, one especial danger always attending the use of the box around a story—one of which the beginner needs to keep himself keenly aware. This is the danger of lack of essential connection between box and enclosed narrative. The making of a box furnishes so alluring a chance for almost effortless fine writing that many times stories are thrust into boxes for no better reason than that the box is already made, lying unfilled in mind or note-book. It is a safe rule, one to

which the exceptions are few, that no story should be put inside a box unless the box come to mind after the story or simultaneously with it, not before. The story being enclosed, it is a wise test to set down in writing exactly what it is the box is supposed to do—whether to mitigate horror, to state the theme, to emphasize a parallel or an opposite case—and then to reread the enclosing paragraphs, apart from the story, to discover whether the written statement of purpose is found to be true. Only a spiritual connection, a connection far deeper than the superficial one between a shipwreck tale and a first night on shipboard, a hunting tale and the presence of men round a campfire, can justify the union of box and story.

"I must have a dance of some kind, you know," says Mr. Folair addressing Nicholas Nickleby on the subject of the French tragedy Nicholas is translating for stage use. "There's nothing easier. . . . You get the distressed lady and the little child and the devoted old servant into the poor lodgings, don't you? . . . 'Oh, Pierre,' says the distressed lady, 'would that I could shake off these painful thoughts. . . . Do you remember that dance, my honest friend, which, in happier days, you practised with this sweet angel? It never failed to calm my spirits then. Oh, let me see it once again before I die!'—There it is—cue for the band—*before I die*—and off they go."

SUGGESTIONS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION

(1) ". . . the author cannot, in good faith, allow the hero to attribute to himself any of the major virtues."

a. What qualification does this assertion require? Is it qualified later in the chapter?

b. The main figure in *The Curate's Friend* tells his own story and tells much good of himself. How does he escape from the usual drawbacks attached to showing himself to be popular, useful, admired?

c. All of *The Curate's Friend* could be told in the third person, with location in the mind of the main character. Is any special pungency gained by the first-person narrative?

(2) a. What purpose does the box in *Arab Stuff* serve?

b. Is this purpose identical with one of those discussed in the text or is it a new one?

c. What is the underlying idea of the story as it now stands?

d. What would it be if the box were omitted?

e. Compare the use of the box in *Arab Stuff* with its use in *Bertran and Bimi.*

(3) ". . . objectionable vagaries, whether of temper or of intellect, often require first-person treatment."

Give an illustration drawn from some one of Poe's stories other than those referred to in the text.

(4) Of the various kinds of first-person telling mentioned in the text, which comes nearest to the effect obtained by objective treatment?

SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITTEN EXERCISES

(1) Explain the phrase "a boxed story," and illustrate, by reference to stories you have read, some of the uses of the box.

(2) Write a box showing the thematic trend, but not the plot, of the story it is to enclose, and bring it to class for suggestions as to plot.

(3) Note one use of "I" as a minor character which is not discussed in the text and explain its advantages and drawbacks.

(4) Write a box to enclose one of your own stories.

CHAPTER VI

THE CHARACTERIZATION

And then I had an idea for John Silver from which I promised myself funds of entertainment: to take an admired friend of mine . . . to deprive him of all his finer qualities and higher graces of temperament, to leave him with nothing but his strength, his courage, his quickness, and his magnificent geniality, and to try to express these in terms of the culture of a raw tarpaulin. Such psychical surgery is, I think, a common way of "making character"; perhaps it is, indeed, the only way. We can put in the quaint figure that spoke a hundred words with us yesterday by the wayside; but do we know him? Our friend, with his infinite variety and flexibility, we know—but can we put him in? Upon the first we must engraft secondary and imaginary qualities, possibly all wrong; from the second, knife in hand, we must cut away and deduct the needless arborescence of his nature; but the trunk and the few branches that remain we may at least be fairly sure of.

—Robert Louis Stevenson.

Interplay of Person and Event

Suggested Reading: *A Start in Life* ✓
The Old Woman
The Mat from Macao

The event all-important.—Not all stories require characterization of the persons within them. Not even all ~~great~~ lasting stories require it. *The Arabian Nights* stands up fairly well against the assaults of time, and the caliph in one of those delectable tales is as like the caliph in another as toothpick is like toothpick, and both are as lacking as toothpicks in defined features. Poe's main character in *The Pit and the Pendulum* is probably a man, is probably

young, but the reader who chooses to picture that main character a woman, young or old, can read the story with no diminution of its effect—with, possibly, a slight enhancement of it. In Wilkie Collins' *The Traveller's Story of a Terribly Strange Bed* (excerpts from which are given in the Appendix), the hero is shown to be a wastrel and a man of adventurous spirit, but these qualities, though they help the story to get under way, have nothing or almost nothing to do, after the beginning, with his adventures in the undesirable inn and the still more undesirable bed where he presently finds himself.

Characterization, then, is not, like repetition, a problem for every story. It is possible to do harm instead of good to the story by allowing a character to develop. A *Sindbad the Sailor* altered by the introduction of a real Sindbad appealing to the reader's sympathy and comprehension would be a *Sindbad the Sailor* ruined. In *The Story of a Terribly Strange Bed*, mentioned above, it is the hero's youth and adventurousness that lead him to gambling and the gambling that brings into his possession a dangerous amount of money. To this extent his character gives aid to the plot. If, however, the person concerned had been a king's officer carrying the payroll, an abbé in possession of church funds, an heiress young or old with part of her patrimony on her person, the shuddering central events of the story would have moved exactly as they do now, the important ones altered not a whit by alteration of the hero's age or sex or turn of mind. (The hero is a convenience only, not an integral part of the story.) His disposition and habits give plausibility to his presence in the neighborhood of the sinister bed in question, but any one of a great number of other dispositions would have done equally well.

Sherlock Holmes in his *Adventures* gets mannerisms but not what can readily be called characteristics. So does Dupin, his predecessor. So do nearly all of their successors. The mannerisms mark the detective and direct attention to him, but they are really connected with the action, not with the soul of the possessor, "no more constituting personality than a scar on the cheek is personality."

In these two kinds of stories, the story of pure adventure and the detective story, it is evident that limit is intentionally placed on characterization so that action may be kept more clearly in view. Both are puzzles. The relation of one step in action to another is in itself the interesting thing. There are, however, varieties of story where characterization is equally limited, and yet where fitting of the action together is not a chief interest. In *The Pit and the Pendulum*, action is not by any means allowed to stand alone. Emphasis and great emphasis is placed upon the hero's torment of soul, but, as already noted, the torment is in no way individual. It would be equally the possession of any soul in the same situation. In *Rasselas*, the prince and the princess, the philosopher and the slave, are repetitions, all of them, of the same wooden figure; interest centers entirely upon the theme which the story reveals. In *The Vision of Mirza* the same thing is true. In *The Sword and the Idol* differences in human reactions are allowed, but they are not so much personal differences as typical ones. Usurper on the one hand, dispossessed on the other—any one of many members of the tribe might have filled either rôle. Any tribe must many times have offered the same rôles to be filled.

In all of these cases, characterization is limited, the hero left featureless or wooden, or reduced to a type,

to the advantage of the story—in one case where events form a puzzle to be solved; in another, where any living being meeting the happenings presented would have had essentially the same response; in still another, where general application is notably more important than individual instance.

The person all-important.—Keeping these stories in mind as forming one end of the scale, let us look at the story which occupies the other end, the stream-of-consciousness story, represented, for the purposes of this discussion, by *The New Dress*.

In one respect, though in one respect only, *The New Dress* parallels *The Story of a Terribly Strange Bed*. At no point does it show events in course of alteration because of contact with the will or the disposition which are peculiar to the heroine. But this is not because the will and disposition of the heroine have nothing to do with the story. It is because no event shows at all except as it has already passed into the heroine's mind and received there its color and significance. The reader is never allowed to see a thing actually happening; he is allowed to see only the heroine's reaction to that happening.

In *The Story of a Terribly Strange Bed*, almost any hero might have appeared without altering the nature of the story's appeal, so long as the events within the story remained the same. In *The New Dress* any set of events within wide limits would be as useful as any other set of events, so long as the same heroine reacted to them. In each case, though, it is "almost any," not quite "any." With both stories, there is a definite limit to change. In *The Story of a Terribly Strange Bed* the substituted hero must not be a person pathetic enough or erratic enough to divert the reader's interest from his actions to his

personality. In *The New Dress* the action substituted must be capable of assimilation in the terms of the heroine's mood, though so definitely is that mood established that probably any action could be assimilated except one causing acute physical pain. (At this end of the scale, event is to character as character is to event in the earlier story, a convenience, not a necessity.) (These are the two extremes, the one where action far transcends individual, the other where individual far transcends action.) Aside from these extremes, what relations between person and event are possible in the short story, and what effect can be produced by one or another of those relations?

The person in ultimate control.—Very near to the stream-of-consciousness story, though differing from it in one important particular, is Hawthorne's *The Minister's Black Veil*, some paragraphs of which are reprinted in the Appendix. Here the first event is the entrance of the minister wearing the black veil. (He has assumed the veil in recognition of spiritual isolation—as a result, that is, of his unique habit of mind.) His wearing it enhances his isolation. This enhanced isolation brings about the next event, and the next event in its turn increases the isolation. So character causes event, and the caused event reacts on character, till the story comes to its symbolic conclusion. In *The Story of a Terribly Strange Bed*, any one of a number of heroes might take the place of the one provided, and the story go on without a serious change. In *The Minister's Black Veil*, a change in presentation of the minister would cause the whole story to dissolve into nothing. Even a change in his social placing is impossible without so many readjustments as would leave the story unrecognizable. This particular figure and no other

is essential to this story. On the other hand, setting and minor characters are given a place such as they are not allowed in the stream-of-consciousness story. The reader sees the church, the congregation, as shown directly by the author, not, as is the case in *The New Dress*, only as they look after passing through the main person's mind. Character is in control, but event and character have each a separate existence.

The relation between individual and event illustrated by *The Minister's Black Veil* gives the most weight to the individual of any of those possible in fiction; consequently it decreases the weight of events. In a story of this kind, the workings of chance especially are reduced in importance. In *The Secret Sharer*, for example, chance does, it is true, bring on the storm, which is the initial cause of the murder. But though chance thus sets the stage, it does not control the actor on that stage except in an external and superficial sense. Various courses are open to him. Among them, he knows himself to be free to choose. In one of Beaumont and Fletcher's plays, an English captain is threatened by the pirates who have captured his ship. "Why, man, 'tis in our power to hang ye!" He responds unruffled, "Very likely. 'Tis in my power, then, to be hanged and scorn you." The same power—that of dying in one mood or in another, of deciding the nature of his response to the events preceding death—belongs to the hero of *The Secret Sharer*, or to any figure shown in fiction as in full control of his own reactions. Substantially he is thus made greater than the events provoking those reactions. A story giving character this relation to event demands that the writer treat his human material seriously. At the same time, of course,

it calls for a central figure rounded out and sympathetically presented. Satire, humor, exaggeration belong under other treatments.

The event in ultimate control.—The antithesis of the relation between person and event just shown is that illustrated by Gibbon's *The Connoisseur*. Through the first nine tenths of the story, the main character is seemingly in control of events, directing them to his own ends. By skillful trickery, long planned, he secures possession of the rarely beautiful Oriental rug he covets for the bed of his equally beautiful Oriental wife—only to find later that he has thereby exposed her to smallpox.

Here the first important event, the unheralded appearance of the rug-dealer, is provided by chance, exactly as chance provides the first event in *The Secret Sharer*. The main figure is presented with choices in relation to that event. He makes his choice and thus takes the direction of later events into his hands. The kind of soul he possesses, his particular variety of cupidity, is the cause of the next happening. This next happening strengthens the trait which caused it and so on, much as in *The Minister's Black Veil*. Finally cupidity culminates in successful attainment. Events have been shaped to the demand of character. Then, quite suddenly, and simultaneously before the eyes of both hero and reader, the first event, the one on which the hero's original action was founded, is unmasked to show it a thing quite different from what he had envisaged—as different as though, at the end of *The Secret Sharer*, the murder had turned out to be not a murder at all but an hallucination.

In this story, as in the two previous ones, the kind of main figure is highly important. Though the hero unwittingly directs events to his own undoing, he does none

the less direct them. It is his particular quality which gives fate its opening. Quite as much as in *The Minister's Black Veil*, there would be no story if he were different. And yet because he is tricked, and the reader is shown that he is tricked, he is a figure lacking in dignity. The effect of such a treatment—the main figure struggling against a shadow, seizing voraciously on a Barmicide's feast—is always sardonic. Man resisting or pursuing actuality is a dignified figure, whether successful or defeated. Man defeated at the end of a long course of careful planning because he has obtained the thing he planned for and now finds it other than it seemed, may be pathetic but is inevitably tinged with the ridiculous.

The reversal of reader's expectation.—Where, as in the story just quoted, the main figure is not directly destroyed by fate, but is tricked by a masked fate into destroying himself, the story has always something of the surprise-ending effect. There are two other relations of person and event which also give to the story they enter a surprise-ending flavor, both of them relations in which the person has the better of events instead of being bested by them. Kipling's *His Chance in Life* shows a hero inert and rabbit-like in the face of existence up to a given moment. In that moment, contrary to all previous habit, he takes life by the throat and successfully wrests what he wants from it. In John Russell's *Jetsam*, the hero remains spineless through twenty-seven years, only to develop in the course of a single day in his twenty-eighth year a spine of unusual stiffness. Any reader can add other stories of the same kind from his own reading, for the kind is one exemplified many times over in magazine fiction.

In all such stories, man seems to trick fate instead of fate's tricking man. And while examination other than casual shows that the hero's new action comes as response to a new event—as response, that is, to an inciting cause—still the fact that the main figure escapes from the conditions imposed by the old events gives to the reader a sense of his having escaped entirely. He seems to have triumphed both externally and spiritually. That the triumph comes late in the story and is won by exactly the personal quality the hero has seemed most to lack adds the element of surprise, so that the final emotion left with the reader is likely to be one of amused triumph.

The other kind of story which is flavored by surprise because of the relation between hero and event is that in which each proves to be unaffected by the other. In such a story, events loom enormous, unalterable. Among them walks the hero, also unalterable. Events are uncontrolled by his passage. He is himself unchanged by events. The phenomenon he presents is similar to that presented by a beach duck meeting incoming breakers. In the path of a wave approaching with weight of water enough to destroy a town, the duck neither rides it nor avoids it, but, disappearing under it, reappears presently on the other side, not a feather ruffled. The wave roars on towards its goal; the duck is now seen, now hidden, but is never changed.

The observer of the duck has usually two emotions—first a breathless watching to see the breaker utterly annihilate the nonchalant sleek bird in its path, next a moment of amused astonishment as breaker goes on to destruction and bird reappears unharmed. So with the story.

Review of the relations between persons and events.—In the matter of relation between human figure and

event, it is possible for event completely to submerge the importance of the figure, 2) for the figure to submerge the importance of event, 3) for interplay to exist between them in varying degree, or 4) for each to move on its way unaltered by the other. Each of these relations produces a particular effect upon the reader and calls for a particular variety of hero.

Relating person and event in the individual story.— Looking at the examples of interplay or its absence as given, and then looking at his own story, what application of one to the other can the writer make?

First, does he now have character as an ingredient in his story or as a frosting on it? This is one of the few questions to which it is possible to extract from any story a fairly definite answer. It is the more easily extracted if the story be considered scene by scene, the divisions being made at time breaks. [Within these scenes, there are three things of importance—first, the hero's placing in matters of age, profession, and the like; second, the significance of his personal traits; third, his individualness.]

In the matter of placing, how many of the happenings of the story would be changed if the hero were notably older or younger? If he were a doctor instead of a lawyer? If he were a Westerner instead of a Yankee?

The hero's placing being safely out of the way, what about his personal traits? How much of the action of the story depends upon his being of jealous temperament? Would a necessary link drop out if he were not? If his jealousy is needed to start the story, to give it its initial push, is it also needed after that push has been received? Or, as in *The Story of a Terribly Strange Bed*, does the hero's temperament account for the opening situation and

nothing more? For example, if the hero is hidden at the intersection of the wall because he wants to spy on the heroine, could he, once he is hidden, just as well have been there because he wants to see she is not molested or because, for political reasons, he wants to see who goes into a certain house? What do his suspicion and jealousy do in the story?

Granting that some one of the hero's emotions pushes the story throughout, is it, as in *The Pit and the Pendulum*, an emotion common in the same situation to all humanity? That is, is the writer presenting an individual or a universal reaction? (If, in *The Pit and the Pendulum*, the hero had lain quiet beneath the approaching knife, if he had accepted the unsought ministrations of the rats with cynical humor, he would then have ceased to be a general figure and have become an individual, though not necessarily a convincing one.) In *The Story of a Terribly Strange Bed*, the hero's recklessness and his debonair quality trim the story, but they are not by any means important enough, nor individual enough, to become the story.

If, studying his own first draft, the writer find that character is only his frosting, then the story, if it is to succeed, must have action of a kind which, standing alone, can command the reader's interest, and the kinds of action which can so command interest are not many. Is the action that of a puzzle—crime story, detective story? Is the action meant to develop a general idea more than to present an individual case—allegory, thematic story? Is the action to show the working of an all-embracing human emotion—fear in its various forms being almost the only one which can be called all-embracing? If it is none of these things, and if its main figure can be altered

without wrecking its whole plan, it is obvious that its chance of being interesting is of the slightest. Recombination and re-planning are needed, so that either event or character is given a definite predominance.

When, however, the kind of character presented proves to be really essential to the story, the next point for examination is whether that particular character has been made suitable to the place he holds among events. If, as in *The Minister's Black Veil* and *The Secret Sharer*, he is in control of his own reactions to events and all but in control of the events themselves, then he must of necessity be a figure that wins the reader's sympathy. He cannot be made repellent. And, in the field of character, it is almost a safe rule that what wins writer's sympathy wins reader's. A figure showing full interaction of character and event can scarcely be made a successful figure if his maker feel for him scorn or tolerant amusement or sense of superiority. His first requirement is a dignified and sincere presentation.

If the hero is to get the better of events unexpectedly in the end, as in *Jetsam* or *His Chance in Life*, that hero also must be assured of the reader's liking though not necessarily of his respect. Such a hero is perhaps best tested, in revision, by isolating his action in the earlier part of the story. Has he been given any detestable characteristics? Is it possible to smile a little as well as to sigh over each of his shortcomings? Especially, has he been kept from infliction of visible cruelties on any of the other characters? The wastrel hero may be, and probably is, breaking several hearts by his actions in the period before his reformation, but if he shows his callousness or his cruelty in the reader's sight, he will prove a character hard to redeem. This particular relation be-

tween character and event calls for a figure enlisting sympathy through possession of the kindly vices—prodigality, indolence, timidity. It calls, too, preëminently for one other thing—for justification in the matter of hero's background or in the power of the altering event. The general cause of change, that is, needs to be displayed quite as convincingly as does the impetus producing the immediate triumph or reformation. In *Jetsam*, for example, the hero has Family, and English Family at that, somewhere behind him, and the tradition of heredity asserting itself is a tradition effective with hosts of readers. In *His Chance in Life* the appearance of the right girl is the redeeming force, a force for which the tradition is well established in all fiction.

Can the writer, then, studying his own story, see a respectably convincing cause back of the sudden righteousness of his wastrel or the self-assertion of his weakling? To insure a momentary belief in his spectacularly altered hero, has he drawn on beliefs already established in the reader's mind? Unless he has, even momentary belief is unlikely to be secured.

With a main character tricked by fate into destroying himself, there are only two definite limitations. He may be liked or disliked, but, whichever he is, his fate must be in contrast to him. And whether liked or disliked he must not have moral loftiness. Fate's trick is convincing only when the soul it is directed against is a petty one.

In the same fashion, the writer dealing with a story in which hero and event are to be ineffective, the one against the other, has need to consider whether he has made his hero small enough. His story is one calling, as much as does the stream-of-consciousness story, for smallness on

the hero's part, and for the same reasons. (If that hero have any degree of greatness, he must in some way defy events, not merely slide through them.) The possession which saves him from destruction is his lack of specific gravity—never a possession dignifying to its possessor.

One other point should be emphasized before giving over consideration of the possible relations between character and event. It has been several times suggested that the writer judge the kind of emotion (not, of course, the amount of emotion) his character will excite in the reader by analyzing what he himself feels about that character. Back of the suggestion has lain the assumption that what the writer presents as likable the reader will like, and *vice versa*. What of the cases where this is not true? If it is possible, as it undoubtedly is, for a given number of the readers of *Vanity Fair* actively to dislike Amelia, who is obviously the author's best beloved, how can lesser workers hope for a better fate? How can the writer reassure himself that his hero, whom he has created for admiration, will not win dislike instead?

With any one especial reader, there is, in fact, no reassurance, but the comfortable general answer to the question is that a writer, whoever he is, may be certain he is not unique. There are other people, a considerable group of them, whose minds move as his does. Given skill in displaying them, there is no bundle of human traits he can tie together and himself feel liking for that some set of readers will not also like. If his likes and dislikes run in the common channel, his audience will be large; if they run in irregular courses, his audience will be small, but the only one possessed of his kind of taste it is certain he will never be.

SUGGESTIONS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION

(1) a. Which of the possible relations between person and event is illustrated in *The Old Woman?*

b. Which of these relations is illustrated in *A Start in Life?*

(2) a. Is there any advantage relating to character in the use of the box in *The Old Woman?*

b. Isolate the phrases characterizing Old Caroline in the box and those characterizing her in the early paragraphs of the main story. What relation exists between the two sets?

(3) ". . . does he (the writer) now have character as an ingredient in his story or as a frosting on it?"

What means are suggested in the text for answering this interrogation?

(4) "If, studying his own first draft, the writer find that character is only his frosting, then the story must have action of a kind which, standing alone, can command the reader's interest."

What kinds of action are capable of commanding interest without aid from character?

(5) "And, in the field of character, it is almost a safe rule that what wins writer's sympathy wins reader's."

How is this statement qualified in the discussion following it?

(6) "Man resisting or pursuing actuality is a dignified figure, whether successful or defeated. Man defeated at the end of a long course of careful planning because he has obtained the thing he planned for and now finds it other that it seemed, may be pathetic but is inevitably tinged with the ridiculous."

a. Is "inevitably" too inclusive a word here?

b. Is your answer to *a* based on reasoning about fiction or on instances observed in your reading?

SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITTEN EXERCISES

(1) Choosing from *Significant Contemporary Stories* one story other than the two assigned with this chapter, explain what is the relation shown between main figure and events.

(2) Using either exposition or narrative, write a character sketch of Young Caroline, putting your sketch into accord with such suggestions as the writer gives.

(3) Write a scene showing the ineffective mother in *A Start in Life* going about her day's work at a neighbor's house.

(4) In your own story now in course of writing, explain what relation between main figure and events you are establishing.

Presentation of Trait and Character

Suggested Reading: *Mr. Reginald Peacock's Day*
The Mob from Massac

Along with the decision about relation between hero and happening is another decision to be made simultaneously with the first. Is a particular story attempting to encompass a person, such as Mulvaney or Judge Priest? Or is it concerned with a personified trait, such as Scrooge or Mr. Reginald Peacock? If the writer has never stopped to think out the difference between a person and a personified trait, he has his work cut out for him before he is ready for writing at all. Presentation of a person and presentation of a personified trait are not only different acts but are used to different ends and predicate wholly different attitudes towards the material in hand.

Kipling sets down Mulvaney. All setting down is necessarily selective in one degree or another, but here the basis of selection is wide. His wastrel habit, his humor, his angers, his tenderness are all to the point. The basis of selection is sufficiently wide so that it is not only perfectly possible for one reader to like Mulvaney and another to dislike him, both enjoying the story in which he appears, but it is also possible for a reader to like him in one story and dislike him in another, to like the man and yet dislike his actions, or to feel half a dozen different shades of pity or admiration towards him at different points in the same story. How much he is liked, in what

way he is liked, depends upon the reader's own temperament and background. He is drawn on a scale sufficiently large to allow observation of him from many angles. The same thing is true of Rip Van Winkle. With Judge Priest, with Leggatt in *The Secret Sharer*, though both of them are sure of the reader's admiration, that admiration is a complex emotion, veering from point to point during the course of the story, and strongly affected by the past experience and particular temperament of the reader.

On the other hand, no reader, no matter what his background, fails to despise Mr. Reginald Peacock and to despise him from the opening of the story to its end; his creator takes care of that. No reader fails to feel superiority towards the heroine of *The New Dress*.

The personified trait.—In presenting Mr. Reginald Peacock and the heroine of *The New Dress*, the author's basis of selection has in each instance been narrowed to admit only of repellent or pitiable presentations. In both cases, author deals with main figure somewhat as the main figures in the two stories deal with events. Mr. Reginald Peacock is taken into the author's mind and there prejudged. What comes out to go down on paper is not all of Mr. Reginald Peacock; it is that part which supports the condemnatory judgment reached. The result is somewhat like that obtained by the taking of thumb prints. Thumb prints identify their owners. They do it with exactitude. They always do it. All the same, the thumb print is not the man. The personified self-admiration which walks the page under the title of "Mr. Reginald Peacock" may completely identify Reginald Peacock. None the less, it is not a person any more than "Mr. Avarice" and "Mr. Worldly Wise" were persons.

In this last comparison is suggested the underlying and

defining difference between presentation of person and presentation of trait. Presentation of trait invariably involves a didactic approach on the writer's part. The very act of isolating the trait tends towards a judgment on it. Actually, of course, a writer always directs the reader's attitude towards his characters, but the writer presenting a trait can be detected at his work. More than that, his leads point all in one way. He offers opportunity for one judgment only. The result is often great clarity, great force of presentation, but it is always domination of theme over character.

Tests for the personified trait.—For the individual writer, intent on a particular story, there are one or two tests not at all impossible of application by which he can help himself to decide whether his main figure is being shown to his readers as a person, more or less convincingly drawn, or as a personified trait. Having decided, he has a path to follow in the direction of widening or narrowing his presentation.

The first test is entirely subjective. Does the writer himself feel convincing moral indignation or reprobation for his main figure? It is not sure, even if he does, that the figure is a trait instead of a person, but it enhances the probability that it is, for, exactly as in life, the wider the basis on which an author considers his character, the less likely is he to condemn that character. Nobody can fail to feel his creator's genial kindness playing around Rip Van Winkle. Nobody can fail to feel the lightnings of Miss Mansfield's wrath against Mr. Reginald Peacock.

Next, is it possible to sum the person up in a sentence, and, if so, has that sentence an unavoidable implication of liking or disliking—more often the latter? "Mrs. Ballinger is one of the ladies who pursue Culture in bands

as though it were dangerous to meet alone." Here there is no mistaking the writer's purpose. The story is to be used, as presently it is used, to illustrate a thesis far more than to show us Mrs. Ballinger. The thesis remains long after every part of Mrs. Ballinger except the scorching identification has passed out of mind. And along with being subordinated to the thesis, Mrs. Ballinger is condemned. She is condemned by implication in the opening sentence just quoted. She is shown later only in such profile views as cannot fail to condemn her. So, too, with "All her new friends loved her—and she had no old ones." The aphorism expresses author's attitude towards character. It used to be said in mocking palliation of the politician's public sins that he was "kind to his mother." That "kind to his mother" side is exactly what the extractor of a single trait omits and must omit. His figure stands all black, all yellow, all gray, as the case may be. And if character is to be used for the enforcing of theme, this monotone is essential to the effect of the story.

If the writer, then, does feel one uncomplicated emotion in considering his character, especially an emotion scornful or condemnatory, or if his figure reduce itself to a condemnatory or mocking definitive sentence, his task in revision, so far as character is concerned, is to re-examine his material to find whether he is single-minded enough in his presentation—whether he taps often enough on the spot chosen and taps nowhere else. Observe some of the taps in *Mr. Reginald Peacock's Day*.

> She did it (waked him unpleasantly) on purpose, of course. It was her way of establishing her grievance for the day. . . . Looking back, he saw (himself) a pathetic, youthful creature, half child, half wild untamed bird . . . and soaping his soft pink body. . . . He could not help a thrill of satisfaction

when he saw himself in the glass. . . . "If you don't want to cook the breakfast," said he, "why don't you keep a servant?" . . . "You do the work yourself because, for some extraordinary reason, you love to humiliate me." . . . He remembered suddenly how she had said when he told her he was going out to dinner: "You might have let me know before!" And how he had answered: "Can't you possibly speak to me without offending against even good manners?"

In every one of the quotations given and in every other one which might be given, Mr. Reginald Peacock is made contemptible—self-absorbed, self-pitying, caddish. If even one tap were out of place—if, for example, Mr. Peacock were shown to be jealously fond of his small son, resentful of the boy's affection for his mother—the story would be seriously diminished in effect. (In the presentation of a trait, no reliefs are allowable.) If, using the same scene division as with examination for relation of character and event, the writer try his incidents, and find that here and there one, thus separated from the rest, denies his own emotional attitude towards his character or fails to fit to the axiom to which the character has been reduced, he has the surest of all warnings that the story will be ineffective. A single-trait story can no more depart successfully from the trait to be emphasized than Mr. Quilp can relax successfully into conjugal tenderness.

But in any repetition governed by a single condition there is the gravest danger of monotony. Stories like *The New Dress*, stories like *Mr. Reginald Peacock* are invariably brief. If the story be the presentation of a trait of character, and if that presentation fill six thousand words, then the probability is almost a certainty that half those words can be cut away to the story's final advantage. Lacking such cutting, it will be wavering and

diffuse. (A single-trait presentation is like a silhouette; it must show a sharp-cut line and it can show little more than the line.)

The character.—Presentation of a trait is a feat difficult enough, but difficult though it is, it does not approach in difficulty the writing down of a person. Mr. Reginald Peacock is far easier of emulation than is any one of the unforgettable Burnell family whose members step in and out of Katherine Mansfield's books. (The getting a person to come into the story is the final goal of every writer, the mark of a living story.)

If the writer knows that his purpose is not didactic, whatever his performance may be, and if, by such tests as he can apply, his figure seems to have begun as a person and not as a personified trait, then what can be done to enhance that figure's effectiveness? And what can be done, if anything, to increase the power of characterization in general?

"Learn to characterize," suggests a text-book on the short story published as lately as 1925. "The writer who can draw real characters. . . ." The counsel is reminiscent of that "Take a salamander" which drove Bella Wilfer, disheartened, from the cook-book; one would so willingly take the salamander if one knew where to get him. In character drawing, "where to get him" is a study for which suggestions must be even more tentative than elsewhere, since here the subject considered is not a practice in technique but an attitude towards life. It is evident, though, that any questions relating to it divide themselves, after the fashion of the questions above, into the general and the particular. What habits of mind, what approaches make for general power of characterization? What means are there for increasing ef-

fectiveness of character presentation in one particular story?

Aids in drawing character.—The power to characterize as apart from the power to present a trait depends usually on (1) intense initial sympathy, (2) on enduring curiosity, (3) on a habit of pondering on human reactions. These are not abilities learned from a book nor are they abilities picked up for application to one story and laid down again. If they come at all, they come to stay. And their cost is high. It is true, however, that the person who eagerly wants to write is likely to be the person endowed with rather more than an average allowance of quick transient sympathy, of curiosity. These qualities he can in a measure cultivate, exactly as he cultivates other qualities, by giving them conscious as well as unconscious exercise.

What this conscious exercise demands is, first of all, time; it means deliberation in the writer's attitude towards daily events. To take an example:

MAN KNOCKED DOWN BY MOTOR CAR IS KNOCKED DOWN AGAIN BY ANGRY MOTORIST

The line is a subhead taken from the New York *Times*. The item under the heading enlarges on it without increasing its content. The man knocked down, picking himself up after a glancing blow from the fender, shouts to the advancing motorist, "I'm not hurt." The motorist strikes violently at him—"I'll teach you to keep out of the way"—scrambles into his car and is gone.

The first response to the item is amusement, the usual response to the incongruous, but—what made the motorist act that way? What has life done to a man, and what will it do to him, whose reaction to nervous shock is fury and physical violence? Or was the fury a result of know-

ing himself to be in the wrong? The would-be writer is still pausing over that item or an accompanying one when the efficient reader is two thirds down the page. He is consciously letting himself pause, encouraging pausing. To the habit of mind which lies at the back of all growth in power of characterization, nothing is more fatal than briskness. And the habit of not being brisk, the habit of deliberating and letting thought put down roots, is certainly in considerable measure a cultivatable one. If the writer can even once shiver responsively in answer to the shiver along that motorist's nerves as he drives veeringly towards home, swerving to miss a shadow here, swerving to miss a shadow there, justifying himself in sobbing curses, then he not only understands a little about that motorist, he is nearer to understanding the causes for a whole group of actions. He has, however, neither read his paper nor put in a restful half hour, and that particular motorist will very probably never make a story or any part of one. The approaches to writing are set thick with waste.

Next in value to the habit of deliberating over human actions, of taking time to fish for the feelings that motivated them, comes the habit of trying to turn these deliberations into expressive phrases. The two processes go on together, both capable of being consciously expedited or hindered and both preventive of that callousing of mind and feeling so needful for the comfortable carrying on of daily life.

Analysis of faces, with search for the phrase which shall give the result of that analysis to others, analysis of relations between members of a family, speculation on the why of human actions, attempt to get that "why" into an expressive sentence—these are occupations partly de-

deliberate, partly accidental. Such studies as those found in Mrs. Dorothy Canfield Fisher's *Raw Material* are valuable to the writer because they point the way again towards the necessity of pausing on an individual long enough for his individuality to appear. And with the appearance of this individuality, even though it be a disagreeable one, sympathy is almost always a concomitant of comprehension. John Bunyan staring from the window at the wastrel reeling below—"Save for the grace of God, there go I"—is reading a lesson to all writers of fiction. (Superciliousness, a sense of superiority, is ordinarily the least profitable of attitudes for the writing mind.) To take such well-known and long antipathetic figures as disliked, though worthy, relatives and disagreeable lifetime acquaintances and to try to get the fair picture of them down in thought or on paper, no story being involved, is an exercise as promotive as any that can be found of that habit of mind which makes for successful characterization.

That the picture thus produced will be a picture the character involved would not recognize as his own has, of course, nothing to do with the case. Neither has it anything to do with the case that two or three different studies, barely related to one another, may be made from one person. Every individual is really far more than one individual; the Autocrat of the Breakfast Table is moderate in claiming each one to be only three.

. . . at least six personalities distinctly to be recognized as taking part in that dialogue between John and Thomas.

Three Johns
1. The real John; known only to his Maker.
2. John's ideal John; never the real one, and often very unlike him.
3. Thomas's ideal John; never the real John, nor John's John, but often very unlike either.

Three Thomases
1. The real Thomas.
2. Thomas's ideal Thomas.
3. John's ideal Thomas.

Only one of the three Johns is taxed; only one can be weighed on a platform-balance; but the other two are just as important. . . . .

Another exercise almost as useful as the one just suggested is analysis of the influences making for one or another attitude of mind on the part of a human being under study. What was the beginning of this one's persistent querulousness? How did that one arrive at his rather complete confusion between the value of actually doing a thing and of seeming to have done it? Does the domineering tone of that other spring from his having had, all through his boyhood, to meet arrogance with arrogance, or does it spring from a hidden knowledge of his own inner cringing and tendency towards servility? Whether the answers found here are "right" in the terms of some other person's reading of the character concerned is, again, unimportant. John's John and Thomas's John never yet came into agreement. What is important is that his own answers should let the writer into secret springs of action. Carried on constantly enough, whether in meditation or in writing, they lead him along the way towards seeing present character as a crystallization of past experience, outer action and expression as revealers of soul.

Presenting character in the story.—These last paragraphs deal with the attitudes of mind promoting understanding of character in general. But with a specific story in hand the writer can hardly wait till he grows in general power before he attacks it. What about the specific story? If the writer is trying to express character

in the round, not in the flat, and knows his expression of it to be feeble, are there any communicable means open to him for improvement of that particular character in that particular story?

Here again the question requires division. Which is it he most needs, to deepen his own comprehension of the person he is drawing or to improve his way of conveying that comprehension to his readers? One has only to talk to some of the most stumbling of writers to know that comprehension, though it precedes expression, does not guarantee it. There is a favorite maxim among teachers of drawing: "If you can see the thing, you can draw it." In the long, long last, and in some esoteric sense, the statement is probably true, as it is also probably true that character actually comprehended can be recorded, but the sense is esoteric indeed.

Comprehension, then, does not guarantee successful presentation; it does precede it. For increasing it in regard to a particular character, there are two or three exercises useful though by no means infallible. One is the writing out or thinking out of an exposition of character quite separate from the story, such an exposition as gets golden illustration in *Uncle Giles*. Here, as in pondering the item from which a feeling for some human predicament may spring, time is distinctly *not* "of the essence of the business." A slipshod, top-surface exposition is worse than none.

Another exercise is the imaginative placing of the main figure in adventures or surroundings other than those the projected story allows him, not for the sake of his solving the adventures but for the sake of seeing whether his creator is fairly sure how he would appear among them. Any one of us knows pretty well how Mulvaney

would conduct himself in a brawl, in a sudden projection into the society of generals, in the event of a woman's falling, uninvited, in love with him. Can we do as well with the being we have made for ourselves? What would the main character in our story do if he were set in Leggatt's situation? With the mob on its way from Massac, would he perform Judge Priest's action? And if so, with what differences in manner and result?

It is, of course, evident that neither exposition of the character nor its imaginative projection into new situations produces material actually to be included in the final work. Both serve only to provide surer foundations and help to keep the mind centered on the person concerned. When, however, the character has been further clarified in the writer's mind by such attempts, it is often useful to try reducing its essential parts into a statement pithy and striking enough to be included in the story itself, probably in its opening.

"Lydia Dane was the kind of woman who could pretend her bread was cake and actually believe it herself. And she always frosted the cake well, too."

Here we have something quite different from "Mrs. Ballinger is one of the ladies who pursue Culture in bands." No moral judgment, favorable or otherwise, is involved. At most there is an intellectual one. Within the story, the set of qualities emphasized by the metaphor may be good or bad, make for their owner's being heroine or shirk. The difference, that is, lies in the amount of complication in the first aphorism as compared with the simplicity of the second, just as the difference between character story and trait story lies in the tying together in the character story of a whole bundle of traits.

But after the main person in the story is clarified as far as may be in the writer's own mind, what about improving the presentation of it to the reader? Perhaps the first useful thing to do is to mark in the rough draft of the story the passages bearing chiefly on character presentation and read them over separately, trying to see what it is and how much it is they say—how many of the things said are non-essential and commonplace, how many are repetitive, which ones, if any, are contradictory to the writer's own conception.

The opening characterization is, of course, always the important one. Once a reader's mind is set in a certain direction towards a character, the writer can rarely cause him to change it unless the story is a surprise-ending one, and even then there is a very necessary and delicate relation between first and final impression. The opening characterization of the figures shown in some of the stories reprinted in *Significant Contemporary Stories* will illustrate this point.

"My name's Leggatt."
The voice was calm and resolute. A good voice.

Through all the course of the story the hero's resolution, his calm before his own impending destruction, are the qualities the reader is to feel most strongly in him, to be most wrung by.

. . . a little man, and had eyes of a hot brown, very erect red hair, a moustache with ends that he twisted up, and freckles. His name was George McWirter Fotheringay . . . and he was a clerk at Gomshott's.

There is no derogation, moral or intellectual, in any of the items noted, but Fotheringay is condemned to petti-

ness, none the less, beyond the reach of any author's rescue.

In "*Arab Stuff*" the heroine is presented as "the wholesome, girl-figured woman . . . a stenographer in a New Jersey building concern." To make her sinister after that opening presentation would be as impossible as to make her philosophic or international-minded.

For the writer, then, all parts of his characterization are important, but most of all the opening part. What does the first sentence about his character say or imply? Is what it says not only the truth but also the most important truth, an embodiment of what he most wants the reader to feel about that character?

SUGGESTIONS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION

(1) ". . . the difference between a person and a personified trait. . . ."

a. What are the differences noted in the text?

b. What one figure in the stories read in connection with the earlier chapters of this book seems to you most clearly a person?

c. What one seems most clearly a personified trait?

d. From your general reading, whether of short stories or novels, who are some of the writers you would name as creators of persons? as creators of personified traits?

(2) "Presentation of trait invariably involves a didactic approach on the writer's part."

a. What reasons are given in the text in support of this statement?

b. Can you illustrate it from stories other than those in *Significant Contemporary Stories?*

(3) a. What means are suggested in the text whereby the writer may determine whether his main character will appear to readers a person or a personified trait?

b. In presenting a personified trait, what tests can the writer apply to it by which to judge whether it will be convincing?

(4) a. What habits of mind and action are suggested in the text for increasing interest in, and understanding of, character in general?

b. What exercises are suggested for increasing the effectiveness with which the figures in a particular story are presented?

(5) a. In *The Mob from Massac* is there any reason apparent for the very late introduction of Judge Priest in the story?

b. Is there a reason relating to character, as well as a reason relating to the action, for the first description of him?

SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITTEN EXERCISES

(1) Selecting for your subject some person whom you have known long and well, try, by whatever form of writing seems best to you, to put that person before your reader within the space of about four hundred words.

(2) "Another exercise is the imaginative placing of the main figure in adventures or surroundings other than those the projected story allows him. . . ."

a. Write a scene showing Judge Priest acting and speaking in surroundings other than those shown in *The Mob from Massac*.

b. Write a scene showing Mr. Peacock on some one day in the week following his wife's death.

(3) Using as subject a character taken from one of your own stories, show (a) a typical hour in the life of that character; (b) a crucial hour in the life of the same character.

(4) "Mrs. Ballanger is one of the ladies who pursue Culture in bands as though it were dangerous to meet alone."

Crystallize into a sentence the striking trait of some one type of college student.

CHAPTER VII

THE TUNE

A skillful literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents—he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very initial sentence tend not to the outbringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no word written of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design.

—Edgar Allan Poe.

Since Poe, in the '40's, wrote the passage quoted above, no discussion of short-story writing has been complete without a section devoted to the "single effect." No passage in American criticism has had wider reading. No other passage has come within measurable distance of receiving so many elucidations. And yet it is open to question whether, on the whole, the passage plus its elucidations has helped as many beginners at writing as it has harmed.

The meaning of "single effect."—The reason for the existence of such a question is that very frequently "single effect" has been interpreted to mean (one unshifting, though increasing, emotion produced by every part of a story.) Under such interpretation, a story of which awe was to be the final effect, should begin with a scene pro-

ducing awe, mount to more awe, and from more to most without relief. As a matter of fact, the passage quoted does seem to say something not unlike this; a considerable emphasis on "tendency direct or indirect" is required to make it say anything else. But whether it does or does not, consideration of any list of memorable short stories shows that those stories are quite as likely to produce their effect by contrast of emotions as by cumulative emotion.

In W. W. Jacobs' *The Monkey's Paw*, one of the most gruesomely terrible of supernatural tales, the opening scene is home-like, cheerful—a comfortable middle-class family, happily bantering one another. So far as the first two or three paragraphs show, the story might be humorous quite as well as tragic. The feeling of the reader, not only in the opening passages but for the several following pages, is likely to be one of sympathetic amusement. The feeling excited at the end is shuddering horror. And yet the story is fully integrated, harmonious, productive of a powerful final effect. In "*Arab Stuff*" the closing paragraphs change the reader's feeling for the whole story. Other examples, many of them, could be cited to the same end. If what Poe meant to say was that, in a successful story, the reader experiences only one emotion through the course of the story, then he was meaning what almost no short fiction in English except his own and Hawthorne's and Ambrose Bierce's bears out. "Single effect" in that sense is something the writer needs to expel from his mind with energy.

Retained impression.—There is, however, one "single effect" which belongs to every well-conceived story. This is the effect produced upon the reader when the story is done—when he closes the book and thinks back

over it. The recollection of a successful story is always predominantly colored by one emotion. The emotion may be obtained by cumulative effort, as in *The Fall of the House of Usher*, or it may come from a re-interpretation in the final paragraphs, as in "*Arab Stuff*," but its presence and its kind are beyond question. Every item in a well-executed story is capable of integration when the story is recollected. And every story, whether its effect is obtained by cumulative effort or by reversal, establishes early in its course a harmony, a kind of tune, partly from its use of minor incident, partly from diction. Whatever offends against this tune is destructive to the story.

Establishing the tune.—So far as ability to establish tune by means of diction is concerned, it is a power slowly attained. Like much else connected with writing, habits of diction can be altered only by emotional growth, growth of taste, increase of vocabulary. Establishment of tune by means of use of minor incident, on the other hand, depends upon vigorous intellectual effort applied to the particular piece of material in course of shaping.

Poe, along with his statement of theory, has left behind a useful contrast covering this second point. In half a dozen years around the '40's he demonstrably learned his method. The following paragraphs, taken in part from *The Assignation*, published in 1835, and probably written a year or two earlier than that, and in part from *The Fall of the House of Usher*, published in 1839, are illustrations of what it was he learned. The first series of paragraphs is from *The Assignation*.

(1) It was at Venice, beneath the covered archway there called the *Ponte de Sospire*, that I met for the third or fourth time the

person of whom I speak. . . . I was returning home from the Piazetta, by way of the Grand Canal. But as my gondola arrived opposite the mouth of the canal San Marco, a female voice from its recesses broke suddenly upon the night, in one wild, hysterical and long-continued shriek. Startled at the sound, I sprang upon my feet, while the gondolier, letting slip his single oar, lost it in the pitchy darkness beyond a chance of recovery, and we were consequently left to the guidance of the current which here sets from the greater into the smaller channel. Like some huge and sable-feathered condor, we were slowly drifting down towards the Bridge of Sighs, when a thousand flambeaus flashing from the windows, and down the staircases of the Ducal Palace, turned all at once that deep gloom into a livid and preternatural day.

A child, slipping from the arms of its own mother, had fallen from an upper window of the lofty structure into the deep and dim canal. . . .

All efforts proved in vain. Many of the most energetic in the search were relaxing their exertions, and yielding to a gloomy sorrow . . . a figure muffled in a cloak stepped out within reach of the light, and, pausing a moment upon the verge of the giddy descent plunged headlong into the canal. As an instant afterwards he stood, with the still living and breathing child within his grasp, upon the marble flagstones by the side of the Marchesa, his cloak, heavy with the drenching water, became unfastened, and, falling in folds about his feet, discovered to the wonder-stricken spectators the graceful person of a very young man, with the sound of whose name the greater part of Europe was then ringing. . . .

The tumult had subsided, the lights had died away within the palace, and the stranger, whom I now recognized, stood alone upon the flags. He shook with inconceivable agitation, and his eye glanced around in search of a gondola. I could not do less than offer him the service of my own; and he accepted the civility. . . .

Upon leaving him on the night of our adventure he solicited me in what I thought an urgent manner to call upon him *very* early the next morning. . . .

In the architecture and embellishments of the chamber the evident design had been to dazzle and astound. Little attention had been paid to the *decora* of what is technically called keeping, or to the proprieties of nationality. The eye wandered from object to object and rested upon none—neither the grotesques of the Greek painters, nor the sculptures of the best Italian days, nor the huge carvings of untutored Egypt. Rich draperies in every part of the room trembled to the vibration of low, melancholy music, whose origin was not to be discovered. The senses were oppressed by mingled and conflicting perfumes, reeking up from strange convolute censers, together with multitudinous flaring and flickering tongues of emerald and violet fire. . . .

"Ha! ha! ha! . . . ha! ha! ha!" . . . laughed the proprietor, motioning me to a seat as I entered. . . .

I might as well here mention that I have more than once heard (without, of course, giving credit to a report involving so many improbabilities) that the person of whom I speak was not only by birth but in education, an *Englishman*.

(2) Nevertheless, in this mansion of gloom I now proposed to myself a sojourn of some weeks. Its proprietor, Roderick Usher, had been one of my boon companions in boyhood, but many years had elapsed since our last meeting. A letter, however, had lately reached me in a distant part of the country—a letter from him—which in its wildly importunate nature had admitted of no other than a personal reply. The MS. gave evidence of nervous agitation. The writer spoke of acute bodily illness, of a mental disorder which oppressed him, and of earnest desire to see me, as his best and indeed his only personal friend. . . .

On one of the staircases I met the physician of the family. His countenance, I thought, wore a mingled expression of low cunning and perplexity. He accosted me with trepidation and passed on. . . .

The room in which I found myself was very large and lofty. The windows were long, narrow, and pointed, and at so vast a distance from the black oaken floor as to be altogether inaccessible from within. Feeble gleams of encrimsoned light made their way through the trellised panes, and served to render sufficiently distinct the more prominent objects around; the eye, however, struggled in vain to reach the remoter angles of the chamber, or the recesses of the vaulted and fretted ceiling. Dark draperies hung upon the walls. The general furniture was profuse, comfortless, antique, and tattered. Many books and musical instruments lay scattered about, but failed to give any vitality to the scene. I felt that I breathed an atmosphere of sorrow. An air of stern, deep, and irredeemable gloom hung over and pervaded all.

Upon my entrance, Usher arose from a sofa on which he had been lying at full length, and greeted me with a vivacious warmth which had much in it, I at first thought, of an overdone cordiality—of the constrained effort of the *ennuyé* man of the world. A glance, however, at his countenance convinced me of his perfect sincerity. We sat down; and for some moments, while he spoke not, I gazed upon him with a feeling half of pity, half of awe. Surely man had never before so terribly altered in so brief a period as had Roderick Usher. . . . The now ghastly pallor of the skin, and the now miraculous lustre of the eye, above all things startled and even awed me. The silken hair, too, had been suffered to grow all unheeded. . . .

. . . one evening, having informed me abruptly that the Lady Madeline was no more, he (Usher) stated his intention of preserving her corpse for a fortnight (previous to its final interment) in one of the numerous vaults within the main walls of the building. The worldly reason, however, assigned for this singular proceeding was one I did not feel at liberty to dispute. The brother had been led to his resolution (so he told me) by consideration of the unusual character of the malady of the deceased, of certain obtrusive and eager inquiries on the part of her medical man, and of the remote and exposed situation of the burial-ground of the family. I will not deny that when I called to mind the sinister countenance of the person whom I met upon

the staircase on the day of my arrival at the house, I had no desire to oppose what I regarded as at best but a harmless and by no means an unnatural precaution. . . .

Comparing these passages, we see that in *The Assignation*, the teller is brought on the scene by chance. He recognizes the hero by chance—by reason of his cloak's falling off. He speaks with him by chance—because no other gondola is in sight. The hero's urgency that he shall visit him next morning is, evidently, not an urgency springing from personal liking. The incident of the child's falling or being dropped into the canal remains unadjusted to the rest of the story. The lateness of the hero's intervention in the rescue is, so far as the reader can see, for dramatic effect only. The special kind of magnificence with which he is surrounded, his explosive mirth, the report of his being English relate neither to the plot nor to the theme. They are fastened on the story, not built into it.

In *The Fall of the House of Usher*, on the other hand, each of the incidents is built in. The teller comes at the crucial time because at that time he has been summoned. He has been summoned not at random but by reason of his having been Roderick Usher's boyhood friend and almost his only friend. The setting of the room into which he enters has both been altered by the hero's mood and serves to enhance that mood. In *The Assignation*, the various Greek grotesques and Egyptian carvings are indicative of luxury but of nothing else; Syrian rugs and Moorish paintings could take their places with no harm done to the story. The books, the music, of *The Fall of the House of Usher* enter into the making of the narrative, not only as books and as music, but as especial books and a particular variety of music, both of them ministering, as do the solitude, the tattered hangings, and the

gloomy light, to their owner's malady. The decision for the temporary entombment of the Lady Madeline, which provides for the crisis of the story, is three times accounted for. For two of the three reasons given, the reader's acceptance has been secured by evidence introduced earlier into the story—this in contrast to a crisis in *The Assignation* which is totally unexplained.

In *The Fall of the House of Usher*, that is, no part can be shaken loose. It is a profitable exercise to read the story, paragraph by paragraph, noting how each detail is united to the final catastrophe by a reasonable as well as by an emotional tie. Somewhere between *The Assignation* and *The Fall of the House of Usher* Poe had learned, with a thoroughness surpassing all of his predecessors in the horror tale, that the first step towards securing single effect is the establishing of cause and effect.

Chance in the story.—For the writer intent on his own story, the moral is obvious. An effective story may leave the reader saying "Why?" to its whole message, but it cannot have him saying "Why?" to details along the way. And to avoid interrogation on the reader's part, there is needed persistent interrogation on the writer's—interrogation most profitable probably at the end of his first drafting of his story. What bearing has the description of the hero on the story? What bearing has the description of his surroundings? What precipitated the opening scene? If the story is a first-person story, how did the teller happen to be there?

There is room for chance in any story, just as there is in any course of actual events. Chance has a legitimate place in fiction. But chance adheres only to external happenings. In *The Assignation* the chance of the gondola's passing at the moment of the child's fall, the chance

of the gondolier's lost oar are chances of a kind likely to be accepted by the reader without resultant distraction, unless, of course, they come in numbers. The chance of the hero's urging the stranger to call upon him at sunrise, obviously for the sake of witnessing his suicide, is chance of quite another nature. It would be possible to reconcile it, but it urgently needs reconciling if it is not to prove disturbing. No chance similarly unreconciled is permitted in *The Fall of the House of Usher.*

SUGGESTIONS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION

(1) "Every story . . . establishes early in its course a harmony, a kind of tune."

a. On what two things does the establishment of this harmony primarily depend?

b. What means are suggested for improvement in the first particular? in the second?

(2) "Chance has a legitimate place in fiction."

a. From *The Mob from Massac* quote examples of the legitimate use of chance.

b. Suggest an illegitimate, and therefore disturbing, use of chance which might readily have been made in the same story.

(3) Howard Wilton, a young college graduate, is appointed factory representative of an automobile concern and is sent to visit the company's agencies in Mexico. On the boat from New Orleans to Vera Cruz he becomes interested in a dialogue between two men about some papers one of them has concealed in his stateroom. On another occasion Wilton overhears the same pair talking about "making our get-away." That evening at dinner the young man notices the two tapping their water-glasses with forks. They are conversing in the Morse code; Wilton, who knows the code, hears the men plotting to rob the Mexican post-office at Guadalajara.

Wilton sends a Marconigram to the officials at Vera Cruz, who meet the boat and arrest the men. They are deported, and on their return to New Orleans, Secret Service men of the United States greet them with charges of having robbed the

post-office at Columbus, Ohio. They are convicted. Wilton receives $1,000 reward offered by the United States government.

a. The story plan given above is obviously unsatisfactory. Which uses of chance are harmful to it?

b. Are there any legitimate uses made of chance?

SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITTEN EXERCISES

(1) Rewrite the story plan given in the preceding set of exercises to make, if possible, its use of chance unobjectionable.

(2) Select a newspaper clipping recording an actual, and therefore possible, happening which yet would be implausible in a story. Explain what additions and subtractions would be needed to make it suitable for story use.

(3) With any one story in *Significant Contemporary Stories*, note and discuss the use made of chance.

(4) Drawing your illustrative material either from reading or from imagination, set down three possible incidents which yet would be implausible in a story, and three plausible incidents which probably could not really happen.

CHAPTER VIII

VERBAL REVISION

> It is only through complete, unswerving devotion to the perfect blending of form and substance; it is only through an unremitting, never discouraged care for the shape and ring of sentences that an approach can be made to plasticity, to color; and the light of magic suggestiveness may be brought to play for an evanescent instant over the commonplace surface of words; of the old, old words, worn thin, defaced by ages of careless usage.
>
> —Joseph Conrad.

Verbal revision of a story is the adjustment and readjustment within it of individual words and phrases. It is of two varieties: revision for enforcing the sense of the story and revision for improving its sound. In revision for enforcement of the story's sense the kinds usually required are revision to ensure the presence of sufficient and suitable implication, revision for introduction of necessary information accidentally omitted, and revision for elimination of incongruities. Under revision for sound comes revision for compression, and revision to eliminate awkwardness.

The work of revision.—In any of these forms, verbal revision is a process which goes on at every stage except the earliest in a story's career and which is never entirely ended. No matter how often the story has been worked over, if it is taken out again after an interval of rest, there are invariably changes to be made, new phrases to take

the place of old, or still older phrases, which time has brought back into favor, to be reinstated. Any experienced writer recalls instances of balancing between two expressions, perhaps with no really important differences between the two, putting in one, then the other, then, on a later reading, rejecting the second in favor of its predecessor. To a considerable extent it is this balancing, this persistent scrutiny of the tiny blocks which make up the structure, that constitutes the difference between material anybody might have had and material none but one especial writer could have shaped to the form it has taken.

But though minute revision is essential to production of any worth-while writing, it is none the less a process that needs guarding. Revision may very easily turn only in the direction of smoothness of diction and prettiness, not in the direction of compactness and clarity. It needs watching, too, to prevent its degenerating into mere quibbling over phrases. The writing mind is fertile in expedients for escaping from its self-imposed labor. What the writer consciously believes to be vigorous revision may really be an unconscious defense against the requirement of going on to more writing. It is for the avoiding of this second danger that the unaccustomed writer usually finds it wise to put intensive polishing aside till the story is near completion. Somewhere near the end, however, there should invariably, for the beginner, be a period of close study of the words of his story—of their adequacy, both in content and in sound.

In actual work, several kinds of revision are usually carried on at once, but it is advantageous, none the less, to keep one kind definitely to the fore in the mind—to try the story, that is, first by one test, then by another. It

is advantageous, too, to limit strictly the time given to one kind of revision at one sitting. If revision is really revision, not simply a dawdling over the page, the mind tires quickly at it. There is profit therefore in changing from kind to kind in the course of two or three working hours. Frequently there is still more profit in keeping several pieces of work under way, one in first writing, the others in various stages of rewriting.

Revision for Enforcement of Sense

Implication.—In one of James Whitcomb Riley's few short stories he draws the picture of a child of literary tastes who was given to mystifying her companions with conundrums.

> Riddle-cum-riddle-cum-right,
> Where was I last Saturday night?
> The wind did blow, the trees did shake.
> And I saw a hole a fox did make.

When ingenuity had been exhausted, she would explain the answer. "Well, the' was a man an' his name was Wright, an' he was comin' home on Saturday night, an' the' was a storm an' he clum a tree to get out of the storm, an' the' was a man named Fox, an' he'd killed his wife an' he come out an' dug a grave under the tree. . . ."

Conundrum and answer, taken together, form an extreme example of the effect produced by many stories in the early steps of writing, stories where the writer has as yet put up no sign-posts along the way towards his conclusion, or still worse, where he has put up sign-posts on which the legends are misleading. For the making of a really good conundrum it is essential that answer be implicit in question but so disguised as to come to light

only after close examination. "When is a door not a door?" If the question is asked in a foreign language where "ajar" has not the two meanings, a guesser may as well save his time. In the same way, a reader may better save his time than spend it on a story which either does not yet contain implications looking to its end or contains only those foreign to the reader's experience. The final judgment on the implications, the making sure that enough and yet not too much information is given as the story progresses, is largely a task left for revision.

Implications may have to do with either character or plot. For plot, they are easiest to isolate in the surprise-ending story, where two sets exist throughout, one immediately obvious and temporarily misleading, the other obvious only in the light of later knowledge. In no case, however—no matter how much surprise the ending is to bring—can a directly contradictory and unreconcilable statement be included. Each one must finally find its place in the story as the story shows itself to be at the end, not only as it seemed to be in course of progress.

In *The Fourth Man*, for example, each of the possible causes suggested for the Canaque's excellent physical condition is a sign-post marked misleadingly.

> He does not seem to suffer. . . . It may be that his fibers are tougher—his nerves. . . . Is there any way he could steal our supplies? . . . if he has supplies of his own? . . . Possibly some method of breathing, some peculiar posture that operates to cheat the sensations of the body.

Each suggestion is a wrong suggestion, meant to keep the reader far afield from the truth, but no one actually denies the truth. And along with the wrong suggestions, invisible largely because of them, runs the light line of

true suggestion, by means of which, when the conclusion is reached, the reader can say of it, "It was prepared for from the beginning."

In the story not meant for surprise, only one set of signs, and that an honest one, is needed, but these signs, even though no longer misleading, must still be only dimly seen. No story could be farther from a purpose of surprise than is *The Fall of the House of Usher*. Its somber catastrophe approaches visibly from the first line. The signs pointing to the nature of that catastrophe are placed along the whole course of the story, but so inconspicuous are they that the reader, though certain of the approach of destruction, does not sense its nature until the moment of it is upon him.

Introduction of necessary information.—Revision for implication is only one of the forms of revision to improve sense. Revision for the conveying of necessary information is a form even more difficult for most writers. Once a story has taken shape, it is harder for the writer than for any reader to discover that necessary information has been left out. The conditions of the story are clear in his own mind, and the clearer they are, the less he can trust himself unaided to find omissions. In *Salt Bread*, for example, already quoted, the writer accounted for his heroine's loss of property by means of the Santa Barbara earthquake. The story, when first submitted for criticism, began as follows:

> The news reached Miss Nan in Chicago, where she had made her home for the dozen placid years following her brother's death. It brought with it at first only a vast unspecialized grief and pity. Then came anxiety for half-forgotten friends, longing for landmarks obliterated, a fierce desire to help. In the tumult of her mind it was not until afternoon that Miss Nan

remembered the buildings from which her income was drawn and their precarious location.

Nowhere occurred any mention of earthquake, and it was not until his attention was specifically called to the lack that the writer realized his omission of even the one lonely fact provided to give plausibility to his heroine's plight.

To find what facts are wanting, the writer's safest plan is usually the formulating, in his own mind or on paper, of a series of questions about the story. To find what questions will best discover shortcomings, it is good practice to take some story already written and observe the information unostentatiously placed in its early paragraphs. The ruling familiar to students in elementary composition classes—time, place, person made clear in the opening lines—is a ruling not lightly to be neglected. Take for example this opening paragraph:

The office of the machine-tool agency, where Mr. Baruch sat bowed and intent over his desk, was still as a chapel upon that afternoon of early autumn; the pale South Russian sun, shining full upon its windows, did no more than touch with color the sober shadows of the place. From the single room of the American Vice-consulate across the narrow staircase-landing without, there came to Mr. Baruch the hum of indistinguishable voices that touched his consciousness without troubling it. Then suddenly, with a swell-organ effect, as though a door had been flung open between him and the speakers, he heard a single voice that babbled and faltered in noisy, shrill anger.

"Out o' this—out o' this!" It was the unmistakable voice of Selby, the Vice-consul, whose routine day was incomplete without a quarrel.

Who the main character is, where he is geographically, exactly where he is at the moment of the story's begin-

ning, what his occupation is, what is the time of the day and year, with what kind of neighbor he has to do—all these questions and others more subtle the dozen lines answer.

When he has studied amount and kind of information given in some other stories, the writer is ready to question his own; he has now a touchstone by which to try it. Information found necessary late in a story's career is always hard to place, but for the meeting of this difficulty there are no means of general application. The needed fact can only be tried and tried again in place after place, till it attains to an adjustment relatively unobtrusive. Consider, for example, the placing of necessary information in the following paragraphs:

Tea was being served in the garden. Joan enjoyed tea in the garden, yet this afternoon she paused discomfited on the verandah steps, regretting that she had come out so thoughtlessly. There were guests about the table under the willow, and Joan was immediately conscious of the contrast between her dark blue dress and the delicately shaded ones of those gathered in the garden. Why had she not stopped to change after coming down from delving amongst those old books up in the attic? Well, she had been seen by this time; she would just explain, though it would probably be thought an extremely odd thing for a young woman to be doing on a hot summer afternoon. She advanced across the lawn to meet the distressed glance of her mother. The men arose; there were mild greetings to which Joan quietly responded, adding at the conclusion, "Pray pardon my dull appearance; I have been up in the attic looking through some old books of grandfather's, and did not realize . . ."

"You look most charming as you are, my dear. If you followed my advice you would wear darker colors all the time." Old Colonel Craddock always came to her rescue. He was interrupted by Mrs. Hatburn.

"Yes, I think blue is really a most cool color. Mrs. Fairfax wore such a beautiful gown of Alice blue at the Curtis ball last week. . . ." Several of the other ladies chimed in with ecstatic comments, and the conversation turned from Joan to the fertile field of fashion.

The story which is to follow has for time setting the years immediately after the Civil War. Its time setting is important, for Joan's revolt against the mid-Victorian expectations of her family is what the story is about, and yet any reader might finish not only the opening paragraphs but the opening pages without knowing when the action took place. In the paragraphs given, where can opportunity be found for stating what is now only vaguely suggested? And what chances has the writer overlooked for reinforcing statement by use of descriptive details?

Elimination of incongruities.—The third form of revision listed as revision for sense, the elimination of incongruities, is really only in part a sense revision. Incongruity may arise either from maladjustment of conditions within a story or from unfortunate choice of the language used to clothe those conditions. When the incongruity is really an incongruity of condition, it must be looked for much as fact omissions are looked for—by question and answer, persistently carried on. How far—for example, are the following paragraphs bad because their wording is bad? How far are they bad because the heroine's mind, language, situation, and background form a confusion hardly to be reduced to order?

When Ella Ormsby was a child, some one had asked her why she disliked dolls.

"Because," she promptly replied, "because they cannot dance."

And now at the age of twenty-two she would have made the same pert response, for Ella was born with dancing feet.

It might seem strange, then, that Ella should be washing clothes on this particular morning in May; yet it was so, and it always had been so as long as Ella cared to remember. Ella's parents were not unkind, nor were they unsympathetic; they were merely poor, dependent, and Victorian.

Monday at "Oaklawn House" meant a series of hardships, and Ella hated them with all the intensity of her sensitive nature. The water was hard, causing the soap to form a grey scum on its oily surface; then the lint from the clothes always stopped up the drain, which meant an extra half-hour spent poking a stiff wire into the pipe. The drain was obstinate and its smell was nauseating.

Revision for Improvement of Sound

Compression.—Revision for the improving of sound commences in nine cases out of ten with compression. It does not end with compression, but notable improvement is possible by removal of superfluous words before alteration of words remaining is even attempted.

To begin the consideration of improvement in sound, then, let us note some of the chief offenders in the way of unnecessary words, first among them the descriptive modifiers.

Green trees crowded close on the blue water.

A black-and-white magpie lifted heavily from its perch on the roof tree.

A grey sea beat on grey stone.

Little chittering yellow birds no bigger than linnets flew in and out among the leaves.

In the first pair of sentences is exemplified the most frequent of all the faults of superfluity. Each adjective

used names a customary attribute of the substantive to which it is attached. With either trees or water, only an especial kind or intensity of greenness or blueness justifies mention. "Lush vines and creepers, dreadfully green," ". . . the vision of a scorching blue sea." In these instances the modifier, itself modified, takes on an unexpected quality. "Trees crowded close on the water." Observe the advantage in sound, as well as in space saved, of the disencumbered sentence. And as soon as the sentence is thus disencumbered, the doubtful claim of "close" to its place becomes evident. The doubt is not to be conclusively solved, however, without the rest of the passage.

With "black-and-white magpie" the same condition holds. There may be readers unacquainted with magpies, but the possibility does not justify description unless the blackness and whiteness are to match or to contrast with the rest of the picture. By omitting "black-and-white" not only are three words saved out of the five or six thousand at the writer's disposal, but emphasis is placed on the verb and its accompanying adverb. "Heavily" might, in some cases, come under the same condemnation as "black-and-white" but it does not necessarily do so. The magpie's rising seems always heavy and full of effort in contrast to the lightness of smaller birds, yet there is a character note, a kind of moral implication, in the adverb which the adjectives do not possess.

On the other hand, in the third and fourth sentences quoted the adjectives help notably to make the picture. Their removal leaves a flat and pointless sentence. And it is to be noted that, in each instance, they help by sound as well as by meaning.

Along with unimportant descriptive modifiers should be

placed those qualifying modifiers from which over-frequent use has squeezed the virtue. "Very," "quite," "rather" are the chief offenders, or, more accurately, the chief victims. "Very," especially, no longer retains even the certainty of being an enhancement and "quite" has been drawn far from its original mooring.

"Remarkable!" Aubrey muttered, staring at the painting.

"Very remarkable!" Aubrey muttered, staring at the painting.

"Quite remarkable!" Aubrey muttered, staring at the painting.

If the writer's purpose is to show Aubrey really impressed by that painting, then the solitary word best serves his purpose. And it is worth any writer's while —quite worth his while, very worth his while—to observe the shade of meaning added in either case by the additional word.

But even when modifiers actually modify, readers tire of the continuous tagging of noun and verb. In part, this is because the tagged noun and verb become monotonous, are offenses to eye and ear. In part, it is the result of a real increase in fatigue, induced by continual shifts in the original impression. First, let us look at a flagrant example.

The little stream wound sparklingly down through the tiny valley towards the shaded pool in which its murmuring course was finally lost.

Here, no matter how appropriate the individual modifiers, the fact that one, and only one, is joined to each noun and each verb makes the sentence disagreeable. (Continuous alteration of the beat of a sentence is always necessary.)

Less capable of instant analysis but even more disagreeable is the following overloaded paragraph:

The sun's slanting rays, casting through the creamy mesh curtains, fell upon a blue-glass bowl of violets. At noon they had been freshly delicate, each tiny, purple head erect and smiling, each velvet petal curved. Now the stems were bent in approaching death, curving green over the edges of the bowl. One small blossom had fallen from the water, and lay wilting and dead.

Verbs.—When modifiers are reduced in number, one result of their reduction is that noun and verb carry more of the weight of the sentence. The feeble verb, especially, needs strengthening in nearly all amateur work. James Montague's burlesque of the contemporary short story —"Don't kiss me," she insincered. . . . "Why not?" he curioused. . . . "Because," she uneasied—is both a guide and a warning. The conspicuous struggle to find verbs in which adverbs are implicit is unfortunate, as is any conspicuous struggle for effect, but "she said whisperingly," "he went hastily," "they stood lingeringly"—the unnecessary feebleness is presently as offensive as is artificial strengthening. How much of the work can the verb do? How much does it do with the notable short-story writers?

She crossed the room, pulled the curtains apart, and opened those long windows.

"There!" she breathed. . . .

Although it (the tree) was so still, it seemed, like the flame of a candle, to stretch up, to point, to quiver in the bright air, to grow taller and taller as they gazed. . . .

Then the light was snapped on. . . .

. . . a foot crunched the gravel, and her desperate eyes went roving quickly about the room. . . .

He leaped up from the table, and after a stare of indignant astonishment, he stalked off to bed.

From a book on etiquette he exhumed a miscellany of useful and peculiar wisdom.

". . . they rushed us aft together, gripped as we were, screaming 'Murder!' like a lot of lunatics, and broke into the cuddy. And the ship running for her life, touch and go all the time."

Any reader can add indefinitely to the list from his own observation. And no reader, adding to it, can fail to recognize the vivacity given the sentence by a verb which at once denotes action and qualifies it. Neither can he fail to recognize the over-feverishness of style springing from continuous use of such verbs. Between "she insincered . . . he curioused" on the one hand, and "she said insincerely . . . he said curiously" on the other, is a middle ground of effective writing.

***Which* and *and*.**—After modifiers are improved, *and* and *which* are words for special watching. "The sin of whichcraft" is no longer, as it once was, cause for complete literary excommunication, but in careful writing the prohibition against it is still effective. A sentence containing two *whiches* with separate antecedents, or one *which* with no antecedent, is nearly always a bungling and ugly one.

He turned into the path which led to the house, which faced him with doors closed and blinds drawn, silent and repellent.

Seven of the rows of scales were somewhat darker than the rest, which gave them the appearance of stripes.

Even when there is no question of different antecedents or of lack of antecedent, *which* is still a word far too frequent in unrevised work. *Which is* (or its equivalent *that is*) blocks many a sentence by means of the unnecessary clause it introduces.

I went into the room that had been assigned me.

I went into the room assigned.

A heavy peal, *which was sounded* from the Cathedral tower, roused him from his reverie.

A heavy peal, *sounded* from the Cathedral tower, roused him from his reverie.

A heavy peal from the Cathedral tower roused him from his reverie.

Reduction of clause to phrase, reduction of phrase to single-word modifier, elimination at last of that hard-won single word—such is the course of revision in passage after passage of any story.

And is, necessarily, one of the most frequently used words in the language. Its over-use or misuse is ordinarily no more than an evidence of mental laziness.

Mr. Jason Smithers, commuter, shambled into the restaurant of the Key Route ferry boat *and* took his customary stool at the extreme left, in front of the window. His was a mild and chinless physiognomy, something like that of a gopher, *and* it required a smile to make it appear at all presentable. Today the look of pleased anticipation that usually accompanied his order of pie and coffee was unhappily absent. It had been a hard day at the bank, *and* his fellow-clerks, all of them younger men, had been exceptionally snippy. He felt like nursing his grudges, *and* his mood was not at all conducive to the enjoyment of this little period of relaxation.

The night air was warm and fresh, *and* Marian took a deep breath. She was glad she had arranged to have a taxi waiting for her at the foot of the driveway, *and* hoped it would be there on time. She wrapped her cape lovingly around her, *and* walked stealthily down the road. The taxi was waiting at the foot of the driveway near the hedge, *and* Marian stepped into it with the air of a conqueror.

The repetition, with its resultant sameness in sentence form, is as monotonous as the droning of a fly and presently as irritating. Removal of half the *and's*, even with no other change, would work improvement. Removal of the clauses following *and* would, in several instances, increase the improvement.

Elimination of awkwardness.—Thus far, discussion of revision for improvement of sound has been chiefly discussion of reduction in number of words. There is intent in the emphasis thus placed, for even though the statue does "lie dreaming in the marble block" most of the chipping and hewing of that block has been accomplished by the time there appears an evidence of its purpose.

In actual practice, however, Pater's famous dictum, "All art doth but consist in the removal of surplusage," is by no means the last word. All the dictum does is to bring farther forward the question, what is surplusage? Obviously it is not every word removable without destruction of sense, or the sentence itself would be written in six words instead of ten. Conspicuous superfluities having been lopped off and compactness thereby approximated, what else can be done to increase effectiveness?

Emphasis.—If a passage, no longer obviously redundant, is still weak or ugly, and if, so far as the writer can tell, the words he has used do actually express his sense, he has two fields in which to seek remedies—the field of word

arrangement and the field of word sound. In the matter of word arrangement, one rule learned by everybody in the grade school is worth repetition. It is this:

Words connected in thought belong together in the sentence.

Its corollary is this:

Words forced out of their thought order in a sentence attain a special prominence.

Now what is the thought order in a sentence? In English it is (1) single-word modifiers of the subject, (2) subject, (3) phrase or clause modifiers of the subject, (4) verb, (5) modifiers or object of the verb.

The tired old man, who was seated on a stone by the roadside, stared steadily before him.

Even though it have more exceptions than illustrations, that is still the foundation form of English speech and therefore of English writing. Alterations of it give to the altered part an especial emphasis—always give it, whether the writer so intends or not.

And I thought of men of old who, centuries ago, went that road in ships. . . .

If the special emphasis is not justified by special importance, the result, of course, is confusion.

A second elementary rule is equally useful.

Important places in a passage should be filled by important words.

The question of exactly how many important places a particular sentence or paragraph has must be answered

anew for each instance, but there are two that always are important, the beginning and the end.

Dr. Macphail hardly knew why he had made up his mind to appeal to the governor. He was perfectly indifferent to Miss Thompson's affairs, but the missionary had irritated him, and, with him, temper was a smouldering thing.

Observe the advantage of ending with "smouldering thing" instead of "with him."

Or consider the following paragraph, taken, as is the sentence just quoted, from *Rain:*

But the rain showed no signs of stopping and at length with umbrellas and waterproofs they set out. There was no town, but merely a group of official buildings, a store or two, and at the back among the cocoanut trees and plantains, a few native dwellings. The house they sought was about five minutes' walk from the wharf. It was a frame house of two stories, with broad verandahs on both floors and a roof of corrugated iron. The owner was a half-cast named Horn, with a native wife surrounded by little brown children, and on the ground-floor he had a store where he sold canned goods and cottons. The rooms he showed them were almost bare of furniture. In the Macphails' there was nothing but a poor, worn bed with a ragged mosquito net, a rickety chair, and a washstand. They looked round with dismay. The rain poured down without ceasing.

Rain is the villain of the piece, the one effective and unthwarted character. It is given its importance in the story by place of mention even more than by frequency of mention.

Reading for sound.—But though there are one or two definite leads to follow, such as those just given, the greater part of revision for effective word arrangement

must be done by ear. And all revision for word sound must be so done.

The woman sat, wide-eyed and weary, beside the bed, watching for his waking.

The graceful grouping was broken by a sudden start on the part of the girl, who, dislodging the pigeons from their perching place on her shoulder, moved forward to greet him.

Both sentences are, of course, flagrantly ugly. With both, it is easily possible to work out rules through the following of which their writers might improve them, but the rules, when worked out, would be of no general use. Each new sentence raises a new question. Only by sensing awkwardness, not by reasoning about it, can a writer improve the sound of his prose.

But how to increase sensitiveness to the sound of prose? For general increase of sensitiveness, two means have the endorsement of a host of writers—the reading aloud of noble prose and poetry and the writing of verse. To improve one particular story, reading aloud is, again, probably the best of all methods, though the amount of improvement possible by this method depends, of course, upon what is the writer's taste as at that time established. If his taste is bad, the final result of revision will be bad also, because bad seems good to him. For finding accidental awkwardnesses, however, reading written work softly aloud, "soothing" it over, is a performance highly useful. To send the voice feeling lightly along a sentence as the fingers of the blind feel along the perforated page is to take a fairly sure way of detecting weaknesses either in sound or in emphasis.

EXERCISES IN REVISION

(1) "In revision for enforcement of the story's sense the kinds usually required are revision to ensure the presence of sufficient and suitable implication, revision for introduction of necessary information accidentally omitted, and revision for elimination of incongruities."

a. In the following introductory paragraphs, what necessary information has been omitted?

b. Will the supplying of this information remove the present obvious incongruity, or does the incongruity lie deeper?

c. Which words can be removed from the passage without harm to its sense?

d. Where can the sound be improved by removal of words?

Night had finally fallen upon another of those long Northern days when the cold alternately numbs and cuts with frozen fury. We gazed silently into the blazing fire, both wondering about the same thing—when the ice broke, could we save the ship? Neither of us voiced our thoughts, but continued to gaze with dull, drawn faces into the fire. Silence had been our only medium for weeks; the great white waste that surrounded and held us prisoner was not conducive to conversation. The strain on both of us was visibly increasing as the time for the ice to break neared, and at the drop of one of the back logs we each started, then gradually settled back and continued to stare at the weird gesticulations of the tiny, flickering crosses of flame that rose row on row, burned, and died with each shift of the logs.

I don't know whether it was the crosses, his nerves, the silence, or perhaps all three, but suddenly Dupré spoke.

"George, we've been friends for a long time, and if you ever get out of this fool venture alive and I don't, you'll probably write my biography; you'll probably write it anyway, some day. 'Biography of Jacques Dupré, Famous Author.' As he said the words he smiled uncomfortably, as though some forgotten memory was twisting his lips, and after a slight pause continued. . . .

(2) a. What is the principal fault of the opening paragraphs given below?

b. What means should you adopt for correction of this fault?

As the clumsy little river ferry "Silas R. Pitts" wallowed out into the current, Pamela squeezed past the two incongruously glittering roadsters with which she was loaded, and finally achieved her so-called bow. Perched on her rickety rails at various points were the other members of the week-end House-Party which was invading the quiet backwoods settlement so adequately served by the Greater Grass River Marine Transportation Company, who was now seated at the wheel, engaged in keeping a fairly direct course across the placid stream toward the tiny wharf faintly visible among the rocks and overhanging pine trees of the opposite shore.

To all this beauty and refreshing simplicity Pamela was keenly alive, as she stood in the snub nose of the ferry and watched her beloved forests drawing nearer, but this time her mind was not wholly on the scene before her, for there was a flaw in her perfect enjoyment. The flaw was occasioned by a simple mathematical truth. Seven people were going on that house party. And seven people make just three couples and a half—a truth that would have been without significance for Pamela except that for once she herself was the half.

(3) a. If you were limited to removal of one word from the badly written passage given below, which word should you remove?

b. If you could remove five words, which five should you choose?

c. If you were permitted to substitute one word (and only one) for a word already used, by what substitution could you most improve the passage?

A confused, persistent sound of drums came to us from beyond the black wall of trees. It rose and fell slightly from time to time, otherwise it was nothing but a

monotonous, unvarying noise, half between a drone and a clatter. We could not tell its direction, only that it emerged from the jungle that stood around us in a mysterious circle, and that it permeated the atmosphere of our clearing.

There were eight of us there (excepting, of course, the guides and porters, who were already sleeping), and we were a remarkable assemblage to be in the heart of Africa.

CHAPTER IX

INCREASING THE WRITING CHANCE

ANY substantial increase in writing ability comes about, as has already been said, as a result of general growth induced by steady practice. Suggestions meant to expedite that growth have been made throughout the book. Apart from these suggestions, however, there are certain sets of habits worth special mention—habits having to do, on the one hand, with the writer's accumulation of material and, on the other, with the conservation of his time.

The accumulation of facts.—In *Harper's* for July, 1927, Rose Wilder Lane published a story, *Yarbwoman*, a complicated tale, elaborately plotted, of cruelty, evil design, oppression, and the final deliverance of the innocent. The story secured a high degree of suspense. It ended with the rescue of innocence by way of sudden death three times repeated. The rescue, with its accompaniments of baffled malice and quiet heroism, gratified the reader's emotions, satisfied his sense of the sufficiency of innocence for its own ultimate protection. If, however, he took the trouble to unwind the tangled skein of loves and hates which made up the story, he discovered that innocence, bulwarked though it was by fortitude and pity and self-sacrifice, would have found no way out of the maze surrounding it except for one other thing. That thing was the fact or the accepted fable—it makes no

difference which—that a rattlesnake's fang left imbedded in a boot leg may poison the next wearer of the boot. This tiny piece of information, gathered up somewhere by the writer and stowed away, ready for use, made possible the whole elaborate structure of the plot.

In the same issue of *Harper's* appeared another story, *When It Happens*, by James Hopper, the story of a man's unconsciously falling in love with the trained nurse who attends him after an operation. In form and manner this piece of fiction was a far remove from *Yarbwoman*. Plot in the ordinary sense it had none. Its hero related his hospital observations and sensations, dilated on the devotion existing between him and his wife, ended his narrative, himself still unaware or only dimly aware of the emotional catastrophe which had overtaken him. But in this instance, too, when his emotions reached their culmination, the placing of that culmination was made possible by one nub of fact—the fact that a special nurse, sleeping in her patient's room, comes in at night robbed of her safeguarding panoply of white, accessible at last to the emotions of tenderness and gratitude which all day long her starched impersonal perfectness has repelled. From that snatch of special knowledge the story got its chance to move.

In neither of these instances was the fact used related to the heart of the story. The underlying idea of *Yarbwoman*, "God's hand shelters His children," has found many expressions. The central catastrophe of *When It Happens* has been worked out in as many ways as there are ways of bringing a man and a woman together. The point is not that only these particular bits of knowledge could help out these themes. Instead, it is exactly the opposite—that every story requires, on the writer's part,

bits of special knowledge of some kind, often a number of them, wherewith to fit its parts together.

Such bits vary in importance all the way from one that solves the puzzle of the entire story to one that merely simplifies a transition or adds another tap to a set of repetitions. In *The Fourth Man*, the writer's knowledge of a custom existent among the Canaques of New Caledonia is the capstone crowning the plot. In *Rain*, the writer's knowledge of the Freudian interpretation of a dream does not at all affect the action of the story but does familiarize the reader with the main figure's state of mind.

Knowledge in the two instances just quoted is drawn from fields unfamiliar to daily observation, but this only happens to be so. In Wilbur Daniel Steele's story, *Blue Murder*, the facts concerning horses shod and unshod on which the plot is founded are those any human being not wholly city bred might well have had and have carried in mind indefinitely. So carried, they would be ready to click into their useful place in the story when the need for them appeared. In every writer's experience the same thing has happened. Times without number some concrete fact has served as springboard for the imagination or as hinge for joining two parts of a story. Often it is one which has lain for years in mind before being called into service.

Discovering these helpful facts, testing their possibilities, recording them is one of the tasks a writer may consciously set himself, stowing away bits significant though disjointed, as a chipmunk stows away nuts, and finding them quite as useful in later seasons. In most fields of writing, what goes into a beginner's note-book is more important than what comes out of it. That is, it is the development of the noticing and phrase-making habit of

mind, not the jottings of plot, which constitutes the usefulness of the entry. Entries made in haste and heat and returned to in colder blood are, when re-discovered, oftener dead than alive. In the matter of nubs of fact, though, the opposite is the case. A fact is quite as likely, even more likely, to be useful cold than hot. Once safely set down in mind or in note-book, it never outlives its chance of being of service.

Since, then, no story escapes the need of fact, either as incentive for the story's taking shape in mind or as a filler and joiner within it, and since facts may be accumulated and stored without damage, what means are open to the would-be writer for increasing his supply?

Some supply he is sure to have in any case. The daily drift of life brings factual knowledge with it. But the drift of life, unaided, usually does not bring enough, and it tends to bring less and less. Not only does curiosity diminish unless it is stimulated, but the habit of half knowing and less than half realizing grows with living, because in a good part of living half knowing is all that is possible and half realizing makes for mental comfort. And even where feeling is intense, feelings about life choke down into silence unless specific information is at hand to provide a medium for their interpretation.

The best and surest supply of facts is, of course, that gained by spending a childhood crammed with opportunities for observation, but by the time a writer becomes conscious of his need, this means of supply is out of reach. Beyond that, the next best way is so obvious that it would not be worth mentioning except for the number of cases in which it has evidently been overlooked by the persons most concerned. Almost habitually, the beginning writer in high school and college buries himself, so

far as he is allowed to do so, beneath a weight of courses dealing with appreciation, letting courses dealing with fact escape him. Courses in the appreciation of literature, courses in writing, attempts at one or two modern languages—such a background is probably as bad a one for writing as four years devoted to study could provide, but it is none the less a background which, with unimportant changes, a host of would-be writers have acquired. Their having acquired it, with the habits of mind which go along with it, is one reason for their remaining "would-be." Certainly the person purposing to write needs to give part of his training time to the study of literature. Still more certainly in the years between sixteen and twenty-two he should if possible have daily practice in writing and expert criticism of what he has written. But along with these certainties is another no less certain. He should be piling up concrete knowledge somewhere. One of the natural sciences or one of the physical sciences, with its accompanying laboratory routine; work in law; work in medicine; intelligently related courses in the history and economics and literature of some one period, carried far enough so that the student feels himself at home in the life of the period—any of these are good. So is astronomy. So is architecture. So is anything which calls for accurate observation and which leaves behind it an accretion of knowledge.

And quite outside the field of formal study, it is still amount and thoroughness of derived knowledge that make a given occupation or hobby useful. A trade or sport thoroughly mastered—something so well known that the attitude of mind engendered by it and the gossip and vocabulary that go with it have become part of the possessor's mental equipment—is always a mine of facts.

The existence of any such mine increases the chance of a given idea's embodying itself acceptably in a story.

This is not because the assisting facts are in any way impossible of accumulation after a story is conceived. For a story about the South Seas, geographies and books of travel will furnish acceptable local color. It is not the impossibility of finding facts to fit a thesis that makes their early garnering necessary. It is that usually the thesis does not arrive unless the fact, some fact, is there to start it. It would be perfectly possible to look up enough about microscopes to write Wells' *A Slip Under the Microscope*, but *A Slip Under the Microscope* does not come into mind for writing until handling of microscopes and knowledge of laboratory practice give the mind food for the story. So with Steele's *The Man Who Saw Through Heaven*. The thrill which goes with staring through a great telescope is a thrill capable of having been felt, of having been two thirds forgotten and yet garnered up for story use. But in order to think of writing a story showing the effect of astronomy, met at first hand for the first time, upon religious belief, one must sometime have stared through that telescope. The man who remarked that he could have written Shakespeare's plays "if he'd only had a mind to" was in the condition of many a writer grieving over the ease with which he could have produced a given story if only he had thought of that particular situation.

Garnering an increasing supply of knowledge in some one or two fields, laying up loose odds and ends in note-books, turning back over this note-book accumulation from time to time to see what fact has acquired a fresh significance—by these means the beginner keeps his curiosity alert, keeps his mind in the habit of seizing on new

things, and thus gives himself one added chance of warding off thinness and early sterility.

The conservation of time.—At the meeting of a club of writers and would-be writers a year or two ago, the speaker of the afternoon used the phrase "the writer's field." In the discussion following his speech, a white-haired woman from the audience brought forth a question. "But what about those of us who haven't yet chosen our field?"

The reason for quoting the question lies in that "yet." Sixty years of life gone for the questioner and still the tentative attitude towards writing, the expecting some day to get around to it, to decide what to write and finally to write it. Questioned in her turn, she would probably have explained that thus far her time had been full of duties, but now—not to-day, of course, because she was at the meeting, but certainly to-morrow—she expected to have free time. And in that very expectation lay the strongest proof that for her a time for writing would never come. It was not her sixty years that condemned her, though certainly they were added difficulties in her path. What constituted the insuperable difficulty was her attitude of mind.

For the beginner, days containing writing time never come. The person hoping to write may as well make up his mind to the fact. Writing is never possible except when planning and ruthless determination force it into a day already full to the brim. The belief that it will become more convenient in the future and therefore may be pushed over out of the present is the pitfall of every writer.

This is not to say that the writer needs to begin writing in his 'teens or soon after to succeed. Such a contention

could be disposed of by plenty of examples. It is more difficult to begin writing, or to begin anything, after the mind has fixed itself in another direction, but enlarged experience and observation may more than offset the difficulty. It is possible to decide late on writing, to begin late, and yet to succeed notably. What is impossible or nearly so is to decide early on writing, to spend four or five years expecting to write without getting any real body of writing done, and then to overcome the resultant habits of dishonest thinking and pulpy indecision. A chief reason for the "yet" in the white-haired woman's futile query was quite possibly her presence at the very meeting where the question was asked. Unless she had done her writing for that day, unless she had planned the day to follow so that it yielded two hours or so at her desk, she had no business being at the meeting at all. Sitting there placid among other placidities, swallowing speeches and tea, a little music, a little gossip, a few reminiscences by a prominent cartoonist, she was sealing her writing fate. And she would have been sealing it scarcely less had she been forty years younger.

What it is that he himself will find useful in the way of stimulation and enlarged experience the writer has individually to decide, but there is one thing he can be sure of. Nothing is useful which interferes with his actually doing writing and doing it under conditions allowing for a fairly fresh mind. Writing comes out of writing—not out of any other thing, though other things may help. It grows out of hours of desk work, done under conditions carefully arranged to enhance their effectiveness. "Write something original every day" is authentic counsel, offered by a master. It is no harder to follow on one day than

on another. And it never can be followed except as sacrifice of something else makes room for the effort.

For the college student the first stumbling stone is usually the conviction that his college years are busier than the ones to come after them; that he will, therefore, have time for the practice of writing later and can afford to put it off. This is a fallacy which has been so often exploded that it is worth only mention. Forty-five hours a week is a liberal allowance to cover the time spent in class and in class preparation by most students. Forty-five hours a week is certainly not more than most people newly out of college spend in the earning of a living. And the appetite for diversion and the advantages of making social contacts and fulfilling social obligations are likely to be greater rather than less in the decade after college is ended.

A second stumbling stone, and this time one of more real difficulty, is uncertainty as to aim. For the student headed towards newspaper reporting, whether reporting of sports or teas or plays, the habit of knowing and being known by many people, of being seen about, is a habit of importance. For the student intending to write, only two things are important—increase in experience and practice in writing. Student clubs, student committees, all the pleasant enhancers of self-importance, are likely to be waste after his first college year and are almost certainly waste after his second. Unless, stringently tried, they prove to furnish new experiences, new values, not merely a repetition of the old, they not only make an exorbitant demand on the writer's time, they also help to form an enfeebling habit of social dependence on other people of his own kind and mental likeness.

Amount of work done.—Amount of writing is, of course, no criterion of excellence. A hundred worth-while words in a day, ten worth-while words in a day, are better than a thousand words dribbled thoughtlessly on the page. None the less, the would-be writer of fiction who sits daily in front of a dog-eared sheet, adding next to nothing to its contents, is usually self-deceived if he think that the quality of his work is the reason for its lack of quantity. What he writes may be torn up and torn up many times, but the act of writing is essential. It is essential, too, that he learn not to compromise in the matter of obtaining fair working conditions. It is possible of course to cultivate concentration so that writing can be done in the midst of hubbub, but ordinarily the same amount of effort could produce much better work if the hubbub were eliminated. Ordinarily, too, regularity in writing hours and writing place, and the clearing of the writing place of all disturbing evidences of other use are things well worth their price.

Fixing the attention.—All these stumbling stones are, however, relatively small. The greatest time-waster and the one most generally met is the slow arrival of the writing feeling after time for writing is secured. Two hours or three are set aside. Half the time is gone before any zest for the work is developed. In the earlier period the mind is either sleepily dull or it is jerking from interest to interest, refusing to center on the thing in hand. By the time the will has been sufficiently exercised to accomplish that centering, the time for writing is nearly over. And though will power is always needed, centering the mind by will power only does not make for the best results. Its cost is high enough to be deducted from the quality of the work.

In addition to regular time, regular place, and relative

quiet, each person has also his own special aids. To find out early what these are and to take pains to secure them is to double the effectiveness of effort. The example of the writer who required that his sister play the cabinet organ outside the study door through all the hours of composition is hardly one for emulation, but in spite of its absurdity, it does point in the right direction. A transparency in the window, holding the eyes with its patch of vivid blue or scarlet; a crystal ball on the table; a window curtain adjusted from the bottom instead of the top, so that only sky and roof-lines show above it—for almost every writer, one of these helps, or some similar one, serves to soothe and steady the mind and to free the imagination. By means of that help, whatever it may be, time lost in the heavy struggle for concentration at the beginning of writing can be partly saved. Let it be emphasized that there is no profit in the conscientious observance of writing hours, unless that observance be intelligent as well as conscientious—unless out of writing hours faithfully kept comes writing increasingly well done.

GENERAL SUGGESTIONS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION

[Of the two sets of excerpts given in this section, the first set in each division is from one of Chekhov's note-books, the second set from Hawthorne's *American Note-Book*.]

STORY SUGGESTIONS

I

1. Z goes on Sundays to the Sukharevka (a marketplace in Moscow) to look for old books. He finds a book written by his father, with the inscription: "To darling Nadaya, from the author."

2. A husband invites his friends to his country-house in the Crimea and afterwards his wife, without her husband's knowledge, brings them a bill and is paid for food and lodging.

3. The club blackballed a respectable man because all the members were out of humor; they ruined his prospects.

4. Death is terrible, but still more terrible is the feeling that you might live forever and never die.

5. "Masticate your food properly," their father told them. And they masticated properly, and exercised for two hours every day, and washed in cold water, and yet they turned out unhappy and without talent.

6. The guests had gone; they had played cards, and everything was in disorder: tobacco smoke, scraps of paper, and, chiefly—the dawn and memories.

7. The children growing up talked at meals about religion and laughed at fasts, monks, etc. The old mother at first lost her temper, then, evidently getting used to it, only smiled, but at last she told the children that they had convinced her, that she is now of their opinion. The children felt awkward and could

not imagine what their old mother would do without her religion.

8. A scholar without talent, a blockhead, worked for twenty-four years and gave to the world nothing good, only scholars as narrow-minded and untalented as himself. At night he secretly bound books—that was his true vocation; in that he was an artist and felt the joy of it. There came to him a book-binder, who loved learning and studied secretly at night.

9. She is wicked, but she taught her children good.

10. When children appear on the scene, then we justify all our weaknesses, our compromises, and our snobbery, by saying, "It's for the children's sake."

II

1. A person or family long desires some particular good. At last it comes in such profusion as to be the great pest of their lives.

2. A man taking his life by installments—say, ten years of life alternately with ten years of suspended animation.

3. All the dead that had ever been drowned in a certain lake to rise.

4. Curious to imagine what murmurings and discontents would be excited if any of the great so-called calamities of human beings were to be abolished—as, for instance, death.

5. A person, while awake and in the business of life, to think highly of another, and place perfect confidence in him, but to be troubled with dreams in which this seeming friend appears to act the part of a most deadly enemy. Finally it is discovered that the dream-character is the true one.

6. Two persons by mutual agreement to make their wills in each other's favor, then to wait impatiently for one another's death, and both to be informed of the desired event at the same time. Both, in most joyous sorrow, hasten to be present at the funeral, meet, and find themselves hoaxed.

7. A person conscious that he was soon to die, the humor in which he would pay his last visit to familiar persons and things.

8. A person to be writing a tale and to find that it shapes itself against his intentions; that the characters act otherwise than he thought; that unforeseen events occur; and a catastrophe

comes which he strives in vain to avert. It might shadow forth his own fate—he having made himself one of the personages.

9. A man, virtuous in his general conduct, but committing habitually some monstrous crime—as murder—and doing this without the sense of guilt, but with a peaceful conscience—habit probably reconciling him to it; but something (for instance, discovery) occurs to make him sensible of his enormity. His horror then.

10. Sketch of a personage with the malignity of a witch, and doing the mischief attributed to one . . . but by natural means; breaking off love affairs, teaching children vices, ruining men of wealth, etc.

a. In the two sets of story suggestions given above, which seem to you to indicate so clearly a certain kind of story—as, for example, a thematic story, a story primarily concerned in showing a trait of character—that it would be impossible to transfer them to any other field?

b. Have any of the suggestions been rendered useless by passage of time or change of location—that is, are there some, available in Russia or available a hundred years ago, which now could not be used successfully? If so, what is the quality which renders them unavailable?

c. Do any two or more of the suggestions embody the same central idea?

d. In the group of suggestions from Chekhov, which seems to you the most promising?

e. If you were using the most promising suggestion from Chekhov for the basis of a story, at what time point should you begin that story? What underlying idea should you be trying to make clear?

f. Which should you choose as the most promising among the suggestions from Hawthorne?

g. In the second of the suggestions from Chekhov—that of the wife who collected money for board and lodging from the guests her husband had invited—transfer the incident to an American scene and discuss the possible motives for the wife's action. Is it possible to find a motive which shall leave the reader's sympathy with the wife? Is it possible to find one which

shall leave the reader feeling that the husband has really been helped, not injured, by this affront to his dignity? From how many different points of view might the material given in the excerpt be treated?

CHARACTERISTICS

I

1. I cannot bear the crying of children, but when my child cries, I don't hear it.

2. The more refined, the more unhappy.

3. . . . to dine every day with a person who stammers and says stupid things.

4. A woman is fascinated not by art but by the noise made by those who have to do with art.

5. Z., who is always saying banal things, "with the agility of a bear," "on one's favorite corn."

6. The most intolerable people are provincial celebrities.

7. Senile pomposity, senile vindictiveness. What a number of despicable old men I have known!

8. An old woman of radical views dresses like a girl, smokes, cannot exist without company.

9. He did not eat, he partook of food.

10. When he laughs, he shows both teeth and gums.

11. A clever girl: "I cannot pretend. . . . I never tell a lie. . . . I have principles"—and all the time, "I . . . I . . . I . . . ."

12. All his life he wrote about capitalism and millions, and he never had any money.

II

13. A woman to sympathize with all emotions but to have none of her own.

14. When he walks, he puts the thumb of each hand into the armhole of his waistcoat and moves along stiffly with a knock-kneed gait.

15. A fellow appears with a pink guard chain and two pins on his shirt—one a Masonic one of gold with compass and

square, and the other of colored glass, set in filigree brass—and the shirt a soiled one.

16. Lord Chancellor Clare, towards the close of his life, went to a village church, where he might not be known, to partake of the Sacrament.

17. . . . she becomes a lover of sick chambers, taking pleasure in receiving dying breaths and in laying out the dead; also having her mind full of funeral reminiscences.

18. A person with an ice-cold hand—her right hand, which people ever afterwards remember when once they have grasped it.

a. From the two sets of excerpts given above, which one should you choose as giving actually an insight into character?

b. Which concern themselves only with physical peculiarities of a kind not necessarily related to character?

c. With what others among those given could number 10 be combined?

d. Does number 9, which concerns itself with an action, express character? Does it suggest personal appearance? Can you find a descriptive phrase which conveys the same impression of the personality of its possessor?

e. Are there any of the excerpts which point unmistakably to presentation of a trait rather than of a rounded character?

f. Which, if any, of the excerpts dealing with characteristics seem to you to contain a clear indication of the kind of story to be written from them?

APPENDIX

APPENDIX

A. EXCERPTS FROM *THE PIT AND THE PENDULUM*

[The hero, following his condemnation by the judges of the Inquisition, finds himself in a dungeon, of which he attempts to learn the extent.]

My outstretched hands at length encountered some solid obstruction. It was a wall, seemingly of stone masonry—very smooth, slimy, and cold. I followed it up; stepping with all the careful distrust with which certain antique narratives had inspired me. This process, however, afforded me no means of ascertaining the dimensions of my dungeon; as I might make its circuit, and return to the point whence I set out, without being aware of the fact, so perfectly uniform seemed the wall. I therefore sought the knife which had been in my pocket when led into the inquisitorial chamber; but it was gone; my clothes had been exchanged for a wrapper of coarse serge. I had thought of forcing the blade in some minute crevice of the masonry, so as to identify my point of departure. The difficulty, nevertheless, was but trivial; although, in the disorder of my fancy, it seemed at first insuperable. I tore a part of the hem from the robe and placed the fragment at full length, and at right angles to the wall. In groping my way around the prison I could not fail to encounter this rag upon completing the circuit. So, at least, I thought; but I had not counted upon the extent of the dungeon, or upon my own weakness. The ground was moist and slippery. I staggered onward for some time, when I stumbled and fell. My excessive fatigue induced me to remain prostrate; and sleep soon overtook me as I lay.

Upon awaking, and stretching forth an arm, I found beside me a loaf and a pitcher with water. I was too exhausted to reflect upon this circumstance, but ate and drank with avidity. Shortly afterward, I resumed my tour around the prison, and with much toil came at last upon the fragment of the serge.

Up to the period when I fell, I had counted fifty-two paces, and, upon resuming my walk, I had counted forty-eight more—when I arrived at the rag. There were in all, then, a hundred paces; and, admitting two paces to the yard, I presumed the dungeon to be fifty yards in circuit. I had met, however, with many angles in the wall, and thus I could form no guess at the shape of the vault; for vault I could not help supposing it to be.

I had little object—certainly no hope—in these researches; but a vague curiosity prompted me to continue them. Quitting the wall, I resolved to cross the area of the enclosure. At first, I proceeded with extreme caution, for the floor, although seemingly of solid material, was treacherous with slime. At length, however, I took courage, and did not hesitate to step firmly—endeavoring to cross in as direct a line as possible. I had advanced some ten or twelve paces in this manner, when the remnant of the torn hem of my robe became entangled between my legs. I stepped on it and fell violently on my face.

In the confusion attending my fall, I did not immediately apprehend a somewhat startling circumstance, which yet, in a few seconds afterward, and while I still lay prostrate, arrested my attention. It was this: my chin rested upon the floor of the prison, but my lips and the upper portion of my head, although seemingly at a less elevation than the chin, touched nothing. At the same time, my forehead seemed bathed in a clammy vapor, and the peculiar smell of decayed fungus arose to my nostrils. I put forward my arm, and shuddered to find that I had fallen at the very brink of a circular pit, whose extent, of course, I had no means of ascertaining at the moment. Groping about the masonry just below the margin, I succeeded in dislodging a small fragment, and let it fall into the abyss. For many seconds I hearkened to its reverberations as it dashed against the sides of the chasm in its descent; at length there was a sullen plunge into water, succeeded by loud echoes. At the same moment there came a sound resembling the quick opening and as rapid closing of a door overhead, while a faint gleam of light flashed suddenly through the gloom, and as suddenly faded away.

I saw clearly the doom which had been prepared for me, and congratulated myself upon the timely accident by which I had

escaped. Another step before my fall, and the world had seen me no more. And the death just avoided was of that very character which I had regarded as fabulous and frivolous in the tales respecting the Inquisition. To the victims of its tyranny there was the choice of death with its direct physical agonies, or death with its most hideous moral horrors. I had been reserved for the latter. By long suffering my nerves had been unstrung, until I trembled at the sound of my own voice, and had become in every respect a fitting subject for the species of torture which awaited me.

Shaking in every limb, I groped my way back to the wall—resolving there to perish rather than risk the terrors of the wells, of which my imagination now pictured many in various positions about the dungeon. In other conditions of mind, I might have had courage to end my misery at once, by a plunge into one of these abysses; but now I was the veriest of cowards. Neither could I forget what I had read of these pits—that the *sudden* extinction of life formed no part of their most horrible plan.

Agitation of spirit kept me awake for many long hours; but at length I again slumbered. Upon arousing, I found by my side, as before, a loaf and a pitcher of water. A burning thirst consumed me, and I emptied the vessel at a draught. It must have been drugged—for scarcely had I drunk, before I became irresistibly drowsy. A deep sleep fell upon me—a sleep like that of death.

My personal condition had been greatly changed during slumber. I now lay upon my back, and at full length, on a species of low framework of wood. To this I was securely bound by a long strap resembling a surcingle. It passed in many convolutions about my limbs and body, leaving at liberty only my head, and my left arm to such extent that I could, by dint of much exertion, supply myself with food from an earthen dish which lay by my side on the floor. I saw, to my horror, that the pitcher had been removed. I say, to my horror—for I was consumed with intolerable thirst. This thirst it appeared to be the design of my persecutors to stimulate, for the food in the dish was meat pungently seasoned.

Looking upward, I surveyed the ceiling of my prison. It was

some thirty or forty feet overhead, and constructed much as the side walls. In one of its panels a very singular figure riveted my whole attention. It was the painted figure of Time as he is commonly represented, save that, in lieu of a scythe, he held what, at a casual glance, I supposed to be the pictured image of a huge pendulum, such as we see on antique clocks. There was something, however, in the appearance of this machine which caused me to regard it more attentively. While I gazed directly upward at it (for its position was immediately over my own), I fancied that I saw it in motion. In an instant afterward the fancy was confirmed. Its sweep was brief, and of course slow. I watched it for some minutes, somewhat in fear, but more in wonder. Wearied at length with observing its dull movement, I turned my eyes upon the other objects in the cell.

A slight noise attracted my notice, and, looking to the floor, I saw several enormous rats traversing it. They had issued from the well, which lay just within view to my right. Even then, while I gazed, they came up in troops, hurriedly, with ravenous eyes, allured by the scent of the meat. From this it required much effort and attention to scare them away.

It might have been half an hour, perhaps even an hour (for I could take but imperfect note of time) before I again cast my eyes upward. What I then saw, confounded and amazed me. The sweep of the pendulum had increased in extent by nearly a yard. As a natural consequence, its velocity was also much greater. But what mainly disturbed me, was the idea that it had perceptibly *descended*. I now observed—with what horror it is needless to say—that its nether extremity was formed of a crescent of flittering steel, about a foot in length from horn to horn; the horns upward, and the under edge evidently as keen as that of a razor. Like a razor also, it seemed massy and heavy, tapering from the edge into a solid and broad structure above. It was appended to a weighty rod of brass, and the whole *hissed* as it swung through the air.

There was another interval of utter insensibility; it was brief; for, upon again lapsing into life, there had been no perceptible descent in the pendulum. But it might have been long; for I knew there were demons who took note of my swoon, and who

could have arrested the vibration at pleasure. Upon my recovery, too, I felt very—oh, inexpressibly—sick and weak, as if through long inanition. Even amid the agonies of that period the human nature craved food. With painful effort, I outstretched my left arm as far as my bonds permitted, and took possession of the small remnant which had been spared me by the rats. As I put a portion of it within my lips, there rushed to my mind a half-formed thought of joy—of hope. Yet what business had *I* with hope? It was, as I say, a half-formed thought: man has many such, which are never completed. I felt that it was of joy—of hope; but I felt also that it had perished in its formation. In vain I struggled to perfect—to regain it. Long suffering had nearly annihilated all my ordinary powers of mind. I was an imbecile—an idiot.

The vibration of the pendulum was at right angles to my length. I saw that the crescent was designed to cross the region of the heart. It would fray the serge of my robe—it would return and repeat its operations—again—and again. Notwithstanding its terrifically wide sweep (some thirty feet or more) and the hissing vigor of its descent, sufficient to sunder these very walls of iron, still the fraying of my robe would be all that, for several minutes, it would accomplish. And at this thought I paused. I dared not go farther than this reflection. I dwelt upon it with a pertinacity of attention—as if in so dwelling, I could arrest *here* the descent of the steel. I forced myself to ponder upon the sound of the crescent as it should pass across the garment—upon the peculiar thrilling sensation which the friction of cloth produces on the nerves. I pondered upon all this frivolity until my teeth were on edge.

Down—steadily down it crept. I took a frenzied pleasure in contrasting its downward with its lateral velocity. To the right—to the left—far and wide—with the shriek of a damned spirit! to my heart, with the stealthy pace of the tiger! I alternately laughed and howled, as the one or the other idea grew predominant.

Down—certainly, relentlessly down! It vibrated within three inches of my bosom! I struggled violently—furiously—to free my left arm. This was free only from the elbow to the hand. I could reach the latter from the platter beside me to my

mouth, with great effort, but no farther. Could I have broken the fastenings above the elbow, I would have seized and attempted to arrest the pendulum. I might as well have attempted to arrest an avalanche!

I saw that some ten or twelve vibrations would bring the steel in actual contact with my robe; and with this observation there suddenly came over my spirit all the keen, collected calmness of despair. For the first time during many hours—or perhaps days—I *thought*. It now occurred to me, that the bandage, or surcingle, which enveloped me, was unique. I was tied by no separate cord. The first stroke of the razor-like crescent athwart any portion of the band would so detach it that it might be unwound from my person by means of my left hand. But how fearful, in that case, the proximity of the steel! The result of the slightest struggle, how deadly! Was it likely, moreover, that the minions of the torturer had not foreseen and provided for this possibility? Was it probable that the bandage crossed my bosom in the track of the pendulum? Dreading to find my faint, and, as it seemed, my last hope frustrated, I so far elevated my head as to obtain a distinct view of my breast. The surcingle enveloped my limbs and body close in all directions—*save in the path of the destroying crescent.*

Scarcely had I dropped my head back into its original position, when there flashed upon my mind what I cannot better describe than as the unformed half of that idea of deliverance to which I have previously alluded, and of which a moiety only floated indeterminately through my brain when I raised food to my burning lips. The whole thought was now present—feeble, scarcely sane, scarcely definite—but still entire. I proceeded at once, with the nervous energy of despair, to attempt its execution.

For many hours the immediate vicinity of the low framework upon which I lay had been literally swarming with rats. They were wild, bold, ravenous—their red eyes glaring upon me as if they waited but for motionlessness on my part to make me their prey. "To what food," I thought, "have they been accustomed in the well?"

They had devoured, in spite of all my efforts to prevent them,

all but a small remnant of the contents of the dish. I had fallen into an habitual see-saw, or wave of the hand about the platter; and, at length, the unconscious uniformity of the movement deprived it of effect. In their voracity the vermin frequently fastened their sharp fangs in my fingers. With the particles of the oily and spicy viand which now remained I thoroughly rubbed the bandage whenever I could reach it; then, raising my hand from the floor, I lay breathlessly still.

At first, the ravenous animals were startled and terrified at the change—at the cessation of movement. They shrank alarmedly back; many sought the well. But this was only for a moment. I had not counted in vain upon their voracity. Observing that I remained without motion, one or two of the boldest leaped upon the framework, and smelt at the surcingle. This seemed the signal for a general rush. Forth from the well they hurried in fresh troops. They clung to the wood—they overran it, and leaped in hundreds upon my person. The measured movement of the pendulum disturbed them not at all. Avoiding its strokes, they busied themselves with the anointed bandage. They pressed—they swarmed upon me in ever accumulating heaps. They writhed upon my throat; their cold lips sought my own; I was half stifled by their thronging pressure; disgust, for which the world has no name, swelled my bosom, and chilled, with a heavy clamminess, my heart. Yet one minute, and I felt that the struggle would be over. Plainly I perceived the loosening of the bandage. I knew that in more than one place it must be already severed. With a more than human resolution I lay *still.*

Nor had I erred in my calculations—nor had I endured in vain. I at length felt that I was *free.* The surcingle hung in ribbons from my body. But the stroke of the pendulum already pressed upon my bosom. It had divided the serge of the robe. It had cut through the linen beneath. Twice again it swung, and a sharp sense of pain shot through every nerve. But the moment of escape had arrived. At a wave of my hand my deliverers hurried tumultuously away. With a steady movement—cautious, sidelong, shrinking, and slow—I slid from the embrace of the bandage and beyond the reach of the cimeter. For the moment, at least, *I was free.*

Free!—and in the grasp of the Inquisition! I had scarcely stepped from my wooden bed of horror upon the stone floor of the prison, when the motion of the hellish machine ceased, and I beheld it drawn up, by some invisible force, through the ceiling. This was a lesson which I took desperately to heart. My every motion was undoubtedly watched. Free!—I had but escaped death in one form of agony to be delivered unto worse than death in some other. With that thought I rolled my eyes nervously around on the barriers of iron that hemmed me in. Something unusual—some change which, at first, I could not appreciate distinctly—it was obvious, had taken place in the apartment. For many minutes of a dreamy and trembling abstraction I busied myself in vain, unconnected conjecture. During this period, I became aware, for the first time, of the origin of the sulphurous light which illumined the cell. It proceeded from a fissure, about half an inch in width, extending entirely around the prison at the base of the walls, which thus appeared and were completely separated from the floor. I endeavored, but of course in vain, to look through the aperture.

As I arose from the attempt, the mystery of the alteration in the chamber broke at once upon my understanding. I have observed that, although the outlines of the figures upon the walls were sufficiently distinct, yet the colors seemed blurred and indefinite. These colors had now assumed, and were momentarily assuming, a startling and most intense brilliancy, that gave to the spectral and fiendish portraitures an aspect that might have thrilled even firmer nerves than my own. Demon eyes, of a wild and ghastly vivacity, glared upon me in a thousand directions, where none had been visible before, and gleamed with the lurid lustre of a fire that I could not force my imagination to regard as unreal.

Unreal!—Even while I breathed there came to my nostrils the breath of the vapor of heated iron! A suffocating odor pervaded the prison. A deeper glow settled each moment in the eyes that glared at my agonies! A richer tint of crimson diffused itself over the pictured horrors of blood. I panted! I gasped for breath! There could be no doubt of the design of my tormentors—oh, most unrelenting! oh, most demoniac

of men! I shrank from the glowing metal to the centre of the cell. Amid the thought of the fiery destruction that impended, the idea of the coolness of the well came over my soul like balm. I rushed to its deadly brink. I threw my straining vision below. The glare from the enkindled roof illumined its inmost recesses. Yet, for a wild moment, did my spirit refuse to comprehend the meaning of what I saw. At length it forced—it wrestled its way into my soul—it burned itself in upon my shuddering reason. Oh, for a voice to speak!—oh, horror!—oh, any horror but this! With a shriek, I rushed from the margin, and buried my face in my hands—weeping bitterly.

The heat rapidly increased, and once again I looked up, shuddering as with a fit of the ague. There had been a second change in the cell—and now the change was obviously in the *form*. As before, it was in vain that I at first endeavored to appreciate or understand what was taking place. But not long was I left in doubt. The inquisitorial vengeance had been hurried by my twofold escape, and there was to be no more dallying with the King of Terrors. The room had been square. I saw that two of its iron angles were now acute—two, consequently, obtuse. The fearful difference quickly increased with a low rumbling or moaning sound. In an instant the apartment had shifted its form into that of a lozenge. But the alteration stopped not here—I neither hoped nor desired it to stop. I could have clasped the red walls to my bosom as a garment of eternal peace. "Death," I said, "any death but that of the pit!" Fool! Might I not have known that *into the pit* it was the object of the burning iron to urge me? Could I resist its glow? or if even that, could I withstand its pressure? And now, flatter and flatter grew the lozenge, with a rapidity that left me no time for contemplation. Its centre, and, of course, its greatest width, came just over the yawning gulf. I shrank back—but the closing walls pressed me resistlessly onward. At length for my seared and writhing body there was no longer an inch of foothold on the firm floor of the prison. I struggled no more, but the agony of my soul found vent in one loud, long, and final scream of despair. I felt that I tottered upon the brink—I averted my eyes—

There was a discordant hum of human voices! There was a

loud blast as of many trumpets! There was a harsh grating as of a thousand thunders! The fiery walls rushed back! An outstretched arm caught my own as I fell, fainting, into the abyss. It was that of General Lasalle. The French army had entered Toledo. The Inquisition was in the hands of its enemies.

B. EXCERPTS FROM *THE TRAVELER'S STORY OF A TERRIBLY STRANGE BED*

[The hero of the story, a young Englishman in Paris, has won enormous sums at *Rouge et Noir* in a gambling hall. When playing ceases, one of the habitués of the place persuades him to hire a bed-room in the inn of which the gambling hall is a part rather than try to go through the streets alone at night with his winnings. He agrees, fraternizes for a while with his counsellor, and finally, carrying his gold done up in a handkerchief, retires to the room to which he has been assigned.]

". . . I secured myself against all intrusion; looked under the bed, and into the cupboard; tried the fastening of the window; and then, satisfied that I had taken every proper precaution, pulled off my upper clothing, put my light, which was a dim one, on the hearth among a feathery litter of wood ashes, and got into bed, with the handkerchief full of money under my pillow.

I soon felt not only that I could not go to sleep, but that I could not even close my eyes. I was wide awake, and in a high fever. Every nerve in my body trembled—every one of my senses seemed to be preternaturally sharpened. I tossed and rolled, and tried every kind of position, and perseveringly sought out the cold corners of the bed, and all to no purpose. . . . Every effort was in vain; I groaned with vexation, as I felt that I was in for a sleepless night.

What could I do? I had no book to read. And yet, unless I found out some method of diverting my mind, I felt certain that I was in the condition to imagine all sorts of horrors; to rack my brain with forebodings of every possible and impossible danger; in short, to pass the night in suffering all conceivable varieties of nervous terror.

I raised myself on my elbow, and looked about the room—

which was brightened by a lovely moonlight pouring straight through the window—to see if it contained any pictures or ornaments that I could at all clearly distinguish. While my eyes wandered from wall to wall, a remembrance of Le Maistre's delightful little book, *Voyage autour de ma chambre*, occurred to me. I resolved to imitate the French author, and find occupation and amusement enough to relieve the tedium of my wakefulness, by making a mental inventory of every article of furniture I could see, and by following up to their sources the multitude of associations which even a chair, a table, or a wash-hand stand may be made to call forth. . . .

There was, first, the bed I was lying in; a four-post bed, of all things in the world to meet with in Paris!—yes, a thorough clumsy British four-poster, with the regular top lined with chintz—the regular fringed valance all round—the regular stifling unwholesome curtains, which I remembered having mechanically drawn back against the posts without particularly noticing the bed when I first got into the room. Then there was the marble-topped wash-hand stand, from which the water I had spilt, in my hurry to pour it out, was still dripping, slowly and more slowly, on to the brick floor. Then two small chairs, with my coat, waistcoat, and trousers flung on them. Then a large elbow-chair covered with dirty-white dimity, with my cravat and shirt-collar thrown over the back. Then a chest of drawers with two of the brass handles off, and a tawdry, broken china inkstand placed on it by way of ornament for the top. Then the dressing-table, adorned by a very small looking-glass, and a very large pincushion. Then the window—an unusually large window. Then a dark old picture, which the feeble candle dimly showed me. It was the picture of a fellow in a high Spanish hat, crowned with a plume of towering feathers. A swarthy sinister ruffian, looking upward, shading his eyes with his hand, and looking intently upward—it might be at some tall gallows at which he was going to be hanged. At any rate, he had the appearance of thoroughly deserving it.

This picture put a kind of constraint upon me to look upward too—at the top of the bed. It was a gloomy and not an interesting object, and I looked back at the picture. I counted the feathers in the man's hat—they stood out in relief—three

white, two green. I observed the crown on his hat, which was of a conical shape, according to the fashion supposed to have been favored by Guido Fawkes. I wondered what he was looking up at. It couldn't be at the stars. Such a desperado was neither astrologer nor astronomer. It must be at the high gallows, and he was going to be hanged presently. Would the executioner come into possession of his conical-crowned hat and plume of feathers? I counted the feathers again—three white, two green.

While I still lingered over this very improving and intellectual employment, my thoughts insensibly began to wander. The moonlight shining into the room reminded me of a certain moonlight night in England—the night after a picnic party in a Welsh valley. . . .

I was still thinking of the picnic—of our merriment on the drive home—of the sentimental young lady who *would* quote *Childe Harold* because it was moonlight. I was absorbed by these past scenes and past amusements, when, in an instant, the thread on which my memories hung snapped asunder; my attention immediately came back to present things more vividly than ever, and I found myself, I neither knew why nor wherefore, looking hard at the picture again.

Looking for what?

Good God! The man had pulled his hat down on his brows! —No! the hat itself was gone! Where was the conical crown? Where the feathers—three white, two green? Not there! In place of the hat and feathers, what dusky object was it that now hid his forehead, his eyes, his shading hand?

Was the bed moving?

I turned on my back and looked up. Was I mad? drunk? dreaming? giddy again? or was the top of the bed really moving down—sinking slowly, regularly, silently, horribly, right down throughout the whole of its length and breadth—right down upon me, as I lay underneath?

My blood seemed to stand still. A deadly paralysing coldness stole all over me, as I turned my head round on the pillow, and determined to test whether the bed-top was really moving or not, by keeping my eye on the man in the picture. The next look in that direction was enough. The dull, black, frowsy

outline of the valance above me was within an inch of being parallel with his waist. I still looked breathlessly. And steadily, and slowly—very slowly—I saw the figure, and the line of frame below the figure, vanish, as the valance moved down before it.

I am, constitutionally, anything but timid. I have been on more than one occasion in peril of my life, and have not lost my self-possession for an instant; but when the conviction first settled on my mind that the bed-top was really moving, was steadily and continuously sinking down upon me, I looked up shuddering, helpless, panic-stricken, beneath the hideous machinery for murder, which was advancing closer and closer to suffocate me where I lay.

I looked up, motionless, speechless, breathless. The candle, fully spent, went out; but the moonlight still brightened the room. Down and down, without pausing and without sounding, came the bed-top, and still my panic-terror seemed to bind me faster and faster to the mattress on which I lay—down and down it sank, till the dusty odor from the lining of the canopy came stealing into my nostrils.

At that final moment the instinct of self-preservation startled me out of my trance, and I moved at last. There was just room for me to roll myself sideways off the bed. As I dropped noiselessly to the floor, the edge of the murderous canopy touched me on the shoulder.

Without stopping to draw my breath, without wiping the cold sweat from my face, I rose instantly on my knees to watch the bed-top. I was literally spell-bound by it. If I had heard footsteps behind me, I could not have turned round; if a means of escape had been miraculously provided for me, I could not have moved to take advantage of it. The whole life in me was, at that moment, concentrated in my eyes.

It descended—the whole canopy, with the fringe round it, came down—down—close down; so close that there was not room now to squeeze my finger between the bed-top and the bed. I felt at the sides, and discovered that what had appeared to me from beneath to be the ordinary light canopy of a four-post bed, was in reality a thick, broad mattress, the substance of which was concealed by the valance and its fringe. I looked up and

saw the four posts rising hideously bare. In the middle of the bed-top was a huge wooden screw that had evidently worked it down through a hole in the ceiling, just as ordinary presses are worked down on the substance selected for compression. The frightful apparatus moved without making the faintest noise. There had been no creaking as it came down; there was now not the faintest sound from the room above. Amid a dead and awful silence I beheld before me—in the nineteenth century, and in the civilized capital of France—such a machine for secret murder by suffocation as might have existed in the worst days of the Inquisition, in the lonely inns among the Hartz Mountains, in the mysterious tribunals of Westphalia! Still, as I looked on it, I could not move, I could hardly breathe, but I began to recover the power of thinking, and in a moment I discovered the murderous conspiracy framed against me in all its horror.

My cup of coffee had been drugged, and drugged too strongly. I had been saved from being smothered by having taken an overdose of some narcotic. How I had chafed and fretted at the fever-fit which had preserved my life by keeping me awake! How recklessly I had confided myself to the two wretches who had led me into this room, determined, for the sake of my winnings, to kill me in my sleep by the surest and most horrible contrivance for secretly accomplishing my destruction! How many men, winners like me, had slept, as I had proposed to sleep, in that bed, and had never been seen or heard of more! I shuddered at the bare idea of it.

But, ere long, all thought was again suspended by the sight of the murderous canopy moving once more. After it had remained on the bed—as nearly as I could guess—about ten minutes, it began to move up again. The villains who worked it from above evidently believed that their purpose was now accomplished. Slowly and silently, as it had descended, that horrible bed-top rose towards its former place. When it reached the upper extremities of the four posts, it reached the ceiling too. Neither hole nor screw could be seen; the bed became in appearance an ordinary bed again—the canopy an ordinary canopy—even to the most suspicious eyes.

Now, for the first time, I was able to move—to rise to my

knees—to dress myself in my upper clothing—and to consider of how I should escape. If I betrayed, by the smallest noise, that the attempt to suffocate me had failed, I was certain to be murdered. Had I made any noise already? I listened intently, looking towards the door.

No! no footsteps in the passage outside—no sound of a tread, light or heavy, in the room above—absolute silence everywhere.

C. EXCERPTS FROM *THE MINISTER'S BLACK VEIL*

[The congregation in a New England village has gathered for morning service. They await the moment for the beginning of the service, standing about outside the church door while they wait.]

. . . When the throng had mostly streamed into the porch, the sexton began to toll the bell, keeping his eye on the Reverend Mr. Hooper's door. The first glimpse of the clergyman's figure was the signal for the bell to cease its summons.

"But what has good Parson Hooper got upon his face?" cried the sexton in astonishment.

All within hearing immediately turned about, and beheld the semblance of Mr. Hooper, pacing slowly his meditative way towards the meeting-house. With one accord they started, expressing more wonder than if some strange minister were coming to dust the cushions of Mr. Hooper's pulpit.

"Are you sure it is our parson?" inquired Goodman Gray of the sexton.

"Of a certainty it is good Mr. Hooper," replied the sexton. "He was to have exchanged pulpits with Parson Shute, of Westbury; but Parson Shute sent to excuse himself yesterday, being to preach a funeral sermon."

The cause of so much amazement may appear sufficiently slight. Mr. Hooper, a gentlemanly person, of about thirty, though still a bachelor, was dressed with due clerical neatness, as if a careful wife had starched his band, and brushed the weekly dust from his Sunday's garb. There was but one thing remarkable in his appearance. Swathed about his forehead, and hanging down over his face, so low as to be shaken by his breath, Mr. Hooper had on a black veil. On a nearer view it seemed to

consist of two folds of crape, which entirely concealed his features, except the mouth and chin, but probably did not intercept his sight, further than to give a darkened aspect to all living and inanimate things. With this gloomy shade before him, good Mr. Hooper walked onward, at a slow and quiet pace, stooping somewhat, and looking on the ground, as is customary with abstracted men, yet nodding kindly to those of his parishioners who still waited on the meeting-house steps. But so wonder-struck were they that his greeting hardly met with a return.

"I can't really feel as if good Mr. Hooper's face was behind that piece of crape," said the sexton.

"I don't like it," muttered an old woman, as she hobbled into the meeting-house. "He has changed himself into something awful, only by hiding his face."

"Our parson has gone mad!" cried Goodman Gray, following him across the threshold.

At the close of the services, the people hurried out with indecorous confusion, eager to communicate their pent-up amazement, and conscious of lighter spirits the moment they lost sight of the black veil. Some gathered in little circles, huddled closely together, with their mouths all whispering in the centre; some went homeward alone, wrapt in silent meditation; some talked loudly, and profaned the Sabbath day with ostentatious laughter. A few shook their sagacious heads, intimating that they could penetrate the mystery; while one or two affirmed that there was no mystery at all, but only that Mr. Hooper's eyes were so weakened by the midnight lamp, as to require a shade. After a brief interval, forth came good Mr. Hooper also, in the rear of his flock. Turning his veiled face from one group to another, he paid due reverence to the hoary heads, saluted the middle-aged with kind dignity as their friend and spiritual guide, greeted the young with mingled authority and love, and laid his hands on the little children's heads to bless them. Such was always his custom on the Sabbath day. Strange and bewildered looks repaid him for his courtesy. None, as on former occasions, aspired to the honor of walking by their pastor's side. Old Squire Saunders, doubtless by an accidental lapse of memory, neglected to invite Mr. Hooper to his table, where the good

clergyman had been wont to bless the food, almost every Sunday since his settlement. He returned, therefore, to the parsonage, and, at the moment of closing the door, was observed to look back upon the people, all of whom had their eyes fixed upon the minister. A sad smile gleamed faintly from beneath the black veil, and flickered about his mouth, glimmering as he disappeared.

READING LIST

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I. SHORT STORY COLLECTIONS

Significant Contemporary Stories, a collection of contemporary short stories, English and American, has been prepared to accompany and illustrate this text. Other useful collections of comparatively recent publication follow.

Representative American Short Stories (Allyn and Bacon), edited by Alexander Jessup

The Great Modern American Stories (Boni and Liveright), edited by William Dean Howells

The Great Modern English Stories (Boni and Liveright), edited by Edward J. O'Brien

The Great Modern French Stories (Boni and Liveright), edited by Willard Huntington Wright

Best Short Stories of 1929, etc., (Small, Maynard), edited by Edward J. O'Brien

O. Henry Memorial Award Prize Stories of 1927, etc., (Doubleday, Doran), chosen by the Society of Arts and Sciences

Contemporary Short Stories (Houghton Mifflin), edited by K. A. Robinson

Contemporary Types of the Short Story (Harper's), edited by Gerould and Bayly

Short Stories by Present-Day Authors (Macmillan), edited by Raymond W. Pence

Atlantic Narratives (Atlantic Press), first and second series, edited by Charles Swain Thomas

II. HISTORIES

Canby, Henry Seidel, *The Short Story in English* (Holt)

O'Brien, Edward J., *The Advance of the American Short Story* (Dodd, Mead)

Pattee, Fred Lewis, *The Development of the American Short Story* (Harper's)

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